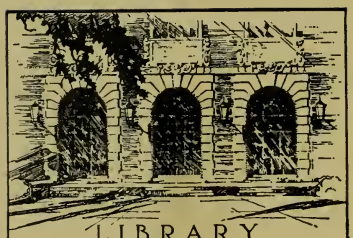
A Mere Cypher

Mary A. Dickens



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A MERE CYPHER

A MERE CYPHER

A Novel

BY

MARY ANGELA DICKENS

AUTHOR OF "CROSS CURRENTS."

"Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound
Reverbs no hollowness."

IN THREE VOLUMES

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A MERE CYPHER

CHAPTER I.

Mrs. Custance made no attempt to detain him; she made no movement, indeed, of any kind. Her eyes had dilated a little as he spoke, and a certain faint shock had passed across her face. Then she remained exactly as he left her, her eyes fixed as though they were still meeting his, until she started painfully as Stella Chisholm's voice struck on her ear.

"Here are the rest of the books," said Stella, indicating the burdens borne by the train of boys who followed her. "Thank

you, boys. Now you can run off and play, all of you. No, there's really nothing more for you to do, thanks."

The boys departed accordingly, with many proffers of further assistance, and when the door was shut upon the last of them Mrs. Custance and Stella were alone in the room.

"What peace!" exclaimed Stella, in a tone the easy brightness of which was rather exaggerated. "Now, Mrs. Custance, we shall get on splendidly."

They got on very silently, at least. For nearly half an hour they worked, no word passing between them. And as the moments passed away, over the faces of the girl and of the woman there came a change of expression that subtly modified the characteristics of each.

With every moment of their silent labour

there grew upon Stella a pale preoccupation which seemed to displace in the growing something of her youth and freshness, to make the distance less that lay between her and the tired woman by her side. With every moment something of its apathy and dulness gave way in Mrs. Custance's face before a light of growing purpose—nervous indeed, self-distrustful, and most ill-assured, but still purpose.

The piles of books by which they were surrounded disappeared rapidly; but Stella's brisk, capable hands had often to wait idle—though she herself appeared unconscious of the fact—as Mrs. Custance's movements became always slower and more confused. They had begun upon the last pile, and Mrs. Custance was collecting an armful of books from it, and dropping them as fast as she picked them up, when she said

awkwardly, without any preface or introduction of the subject, and with her dull voice a little duller than usual, as though something suppressed it:

"I have known Mr. Strange a long time now."

Stella was kneeling upright, her hands resting idly on the packing-case. She started violently at the sound of Mrs. Custance's voice, and turned towards her involuntarily, her pale, absorbed face flushing slightly. Then the sense of what Mrs. Custance had said seemed to dawn on her; her face hardened, and she stretched out her hands for the books the other held, saying only "Thanks!" as though the words required no answer.

"Six years—it is six years—is a long time," continued Mrs. Custance in the same tone, as a dull colour rose in her wan face.

"Yes," returned Stella with cold indifference. "I am ready, please, Mrs. Custance."

Mrs. Custance turned mechanically towards the pile of books and went on speaking, ignoring Stella's obvious intention of changing the subject, except inasmuch as her voice was not quite steady, as she said, infelicitously enough as regards grammar:

"And when one lives in the same house with any one, one gets to know them well."

Stella glanced up, as though surprised.

"Did Mr. Strange ever live in your house?" she said involuntarily.

"Yes." The flat voice was very low, and there was a moment's pause. Then, before Stella could speak, Mrs. Custance turned to her suddenly, the pile of books she had collected unthought of in her hands.

"You haven't heard the details," she

said, speaking very pleadingly and nervously. "You can't have heard the details, or you would know that he did. The bare fact—oh! there are so many things that make a difference, always, and it is so hard to know the truth! If you knew the whole story, Miss Chisholm—if you knew how—— It was because there was no hope that he came to Thornsdyke, and then—then—oh! if you only knew how hard he fought!"

Stella had listened to the incoherent sentences, broken off, it seemed to her, by the same shyness and embarrassment with which to her perception Mrs. Custance's face was faintly flushed, and her eyes dilated with an ever-strengthening expression of astonishment and interest. She rose involuntarily to her feet as Mrs. Custance stopped.

"I don't understand, Mrs. Custance," she said. "You are not talking about Mr.

Strange, are you? Story? I haven't heard any story about him. Was he so dreadfully ill?"

Quick of feeling and impulsive as she was, all Stella's consciousness seemed to be concentrated in the surprise of the moment, and her face, as she turned it to Mrs. Custance, was full of enquiring concern, as though the present were forgotten in this unexpected interest from the past. But she received no answer. At the first sound of her uncomprehending voice the nervous movement in Mrs. Custance's face had stopped suddenly, as though she were stunned. The unusual colour died out of her cheeks, leaving them quite white, and as Stella paused for an answer she made a vague movement with her hands, offering her the books she held.

"I—I forget," she faltered. "It is a

long time ago! There is no need to talk of it. I only thought——"

"What did you think?" said Stella interestedly, taking no notice of the books proffered her again by Mrs. Custance, as if in mute appeal to her to return to business. "Is there a story about Mr. Strange? A bad story? Oh, I don't believe it!"

It was a girlish cry of genuine indignation, and meeting the defiant demand of the shining eyes Mrs. Custance seemed to grow at once paler and more impassive.

"It doesn't matter," she murmured. "Please forget all about it, Miss Chisholm; I am so stupid!" The last words were almost inaudible, choked by force of the conviction they expressed, but Stella was far too much interested to notice them.

"I can't forget it," she exclaimed. "What is it, Mrs. Custance? Tell me what it is!

Mr. Strange came to your house because there was no hope. What do you mean? Oh!" A sudden gleam of light broke in upon Stella, and the exclamation was almost a cry of horror. She paused a moment and then went on, her voice quick and tense with incredulity and distress: "Dr. Custance—why, Aubrey told me a long time ago that Dr. Custance, when he lived in the country, used to take—— Oh, Mrs. Custance, it wasn't that! It wasn't that!"

There was an indescribable mixture of pity and horror in her voice, and Mrs. Custance, with no more movement or expression in her face than if it had been moulded in wax, answered her faintly, replying to her question only by a movement of her head.

"He was heart-broken when he came to us," she said with a steadiness that might have come from a hopeless acceptance of

irretrievable mistake. "I don't know how it happened first, but he had gone on and on because the degradation was more than he could bear. You know him, Miss Chisholm, you know how he would feel that he had forfeited everything for ever. He didn't hope for anything, except that he might soon die, I think, when he came to Thornsdyke."

The thin voice quivered and Stella turned away, fixing her eyes on the books in the packing-case at her side.

"Any other man, almost, would have died," went on Mrs. Custance; "but he is not like other men. He stopped himself. Oh, you don't know—if I could only tell you —what that means! He took a resolution and he never broke it. He fought and fought with temptation and with despair."

"Oh, poor fellow! Poor fellow!"

The words were very low, and so

womanly in their tender pitifulness that Stella was probably quite unconscious that she had uttered them above her breath. But Mrs. Custance caught them, and quite suddenly the dead hopelessness of her face quickened into a quivering, eager anxiety.

"Miss Chisholm!" she said, almost whispering the hurried, diffident words, "don't be angry with me, but if you hadn't heard this, why are you so——"

"If I hadn't heard this!" exclaimed Stella, suddenly turning to her impulsively, her clear eyes bright with tears, her whole girlish face moved and roused. "Why, Mrs. Custance, do you think such a story as this could make any difference to me, except to make me see how brave and good he is, except to make me pity and admire him from the bottom of my heart? Oh, I'm glad! I'm glad I know!"

"Then why——?"

"Why?" echoed Stella, touched into a new fire of passionate youthful pride and indignation as she faced the present in all the glow of feeling and excitement roused in her by her contact with the past, and speaking on the passionate impulse of the moment, oblivious of the strangeness of the question coming from such a quarter. "Why! Because I've put myself into a horrible, an unbearable position! Because no one shall ever think that it was——" She broke off suddenly, her very throat crimson, and as suddenly began again. "Look, Mrs. Custance!" she said. "When I met Mr. Strange first I talked to him; I asked him to come and see us; I wanted him very much to come, and I made opportunities of talking to him—perhaps he saw I did! It's very likely; oh, it's horribly

likely! He took up the trust business as I had hoped he would, and I cared for that with all my heart and soul, and I would have done anything towards it. Then he started this colonisation scheme, and I worked for it, as who would not work for such a splendid plan? I never thought, of course I never thought of him, except as the centre of everything; I never thought—at least I never knew I thought—about him personally at all, until, oh, until he came back from America last time. That evening——" She paused again and another hot wave of colour swept up to the roots of her hair. "That evening he was different; it was all different, and I was happy. And then—then, when he was gone, Aunt Rosa—oh! I can't tell you exactly what she said; I don't remember; it wasn't the words. She thought she was being so kind and nice; only she made me

see all at once that people might think, that he might think—that it looked as though it had been for him—himself—all the time. As if I'd tried to get him to help because I liked him; as if I'd worked because I liked him; as if I'd just been trying through it all to make him like me! Oh! I won't bear it!"

With a little, fierce cry of wounded pride and outraged womanhood, Stella sank suddenly down by the packing-case, and made a kind of blind dash at the books, as though to find some relief in action. But the gesture resulted in nothing, and she let herself slip to the floor, and pressed her face fiercely down on her arms as they rested upon the top of the case.

There was a dead silence. Mrs. Custance made no attempt to touch her. She had listened to the quick, passionate words,

making no attempt to interrupt them, but with a strange hope struggling to declare itself in her eyes. Now she stood quite still, and all her consciousness seemed to be concentrated in the intent consideration with which all the lines of her face were broken up and quivering.

"I—I am not clever," she said at last, her voice very low, hesitating, and ill-assured as though she were impelled to speak and dreaded inexpressibly to speak mistakenly. "I am very stupid, but — but ——" she stopped, as though the words she wanted refused to come to her, and then, evidently abandoning all idea of further preliminary, she said simply: "Mr. Strange loves you very much." She paused again, looking straight down at the girlish figure. She and Stella had never been intimate, but she spoke now without the formal "Miss Chis-

holm," as though there were something between them, woman and woman, by which conventionality was done away with.

If she had expected any answer she received none; but apparently she had not, for she went on at once:

"He is very unhappy. If you love him—if you could have loved him if this hadn't happened—it seems to me a dreadful thing to let pride——" she hesitated, and broke off. "There is so much pain in the world," she said; and in the words uttered in that sad, tired voice there was an indescribable pathos. "So much pain everywhere which no one can help; it seems a dreadful thing to make more."

The hesitating, pleading words died away, and there was only a little, insignificant woman's figure looking down, with dull blue eyes that could express as little as the

faltering tongue, upon a girl whose face was hidden.

Stella was very still. At last she moved, rose with a face indescribably softened and altered, and turned to Mrs. Custance. But before she could speak the door of the room opened, and a party of two or three ladies entered, come back from lunch. With a hurried attempt at her usual manner, Stella said quickly that it was late and she must go, and taking her hat from a table near, she went away with only a smile to Mrs. Custance, who was being talked to by one of the new-comers. The thanks Stella had intended for Mrs. Custance were never spoken. There are some people in the world for whom such things apparently are not.

Half an hour later Mrs. Custance, with a curiously spent, exhausted look about

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her impassive face, was walking down the street away from the warehouse. She was on her way home eventually, but she had to go first to one of the worst courts of St. Fabian's to speak to a woman—one of the few respectable women in that particular court—who was one of the intending colonists.

It was a warm spring day, and the court in its closeness and squalor was stifling. It was noisy, too—very noisy; Mrs. Custance passing down it put her hand involuntarily to her head, and even as she made the weary gesture she stood suddenly still, and it became a movement of breathless intentness.

"Mrs. Custance! Mrs. Custance! Mrs. Custance!"

Across all the din and tumult of the court, one cry among a hundred, her own

name rang out again and again, coming from an open window almost immediately over her head. The voice rang with the unnatural, far-away ring of delirium, hollow and hoarse, but Mrs. Custance knew it on the instant. It was the voice of Alice Eade.

CHAPTER II.

Mrs. Custance knew the house well; there was no worker in St. Fabian's, indeed, who did not know it. For an instant, as she stood outside it, and that voice rang in her ears calling to her, as it were, across the deepest gulf that separates woman from woman, there struggled over her face a speechless shock of horror and distress that seemed to arrest her every faculty. Then, shaking in every limb, with a strange, blanched look on her face, she passed through the open door of the house, hardly seeming to see, for the pitiful horror with which her eyes were wide, the group of slatternly voluble women by which

it was surrounded; not noticing that two or three followed her up the dirty staircase, expressing shrill doubts as to whether or no she should be allowed to proceed, and still shriller distaste for "pryers." The voice, as she went, sank into hoarse, rapid mutterings, and following on in the direction from which it came, Mrs. Custance found herself suddenly looking through the broken panel of a latchless door straight into a miserable room.

The squalid setting made by the jagged, splintered wood framed one corner of the room only, but that one corner made a picture to which no enlargement of the scale, no amplification of detail could have added one jot of wretchedness. The little bit of dirty, dilapidated wall that formed the background; the pallet bed upon the dirty floor; the ragged, scanty coverings; the broken

chair; were as eloquent of squalor as inanimate things can be. And all their sordid significance, simply offensive in itself, was dominated and rendered tragic by the human figure in their midst, the wreck of splendid womanhood lying beneath that tattered covering—Alice Eade.

Her face was towards the broken door, and Mrs. Custance, standing on the other side of it, saw nothing else. With a little movement of her lips, as though some sort of pitiful ejaculation formed itself upon them, she was stepping quickly forward, when the door was suddenly flung open from within and a young woman, dirty and dishevelled in dress, made her appearance on the threshold. Her coarse, hard face was swollen with crying, but it was also for the moment flushed with wrath.

"What do you want?" she demanded,

facing Mrs. Custance fiercely. "Nobody asked you to come up, as I knows, an' nobody as she wouldn't a' let in knowingly isn't goin' to come foolin' round her, now! We don't want none o' your sort here, and so I tell you!"

She was just going to slam to the poor barrier amid a chorus from the women on the stairs echoing her last words more or less coarsely, when Mrs. Custance, conscious of nothing but her own pity and longing, started forward and caught the torn, tawdry skirt in her hand.

"Oh, let me come in!" she cried. "I knew her! Oh, poor girl, poor girl! I was so fond of her. She wouldn't mind my coming. I know she wouldn't. Why, she was calling my name just now. Let me come in to her."

The woman had turned to her fiercely on

feeling the detaining hand, but as Mrs. Custance spoke, there swept over her one of the sudden changes of feeling common to her uncontrolled class, and quite suddenly she burst into a passion of tears.

"She's a-goin," she cried. "She won't never mind nothin' more in this world. An' I ain't never 'ad a friend but her!"

In any common bond of wretchedness, individuality is dominated by the broad needs and feelings of humanity at large, and the convention and obstruction between man and man which individuality creates are swept away. The very poor and the very degraded are linked together always by such a bond; their whole lives are lived out in it, and trouble is their surest badge of fellowship. Not one of the group behind the crying woman had ever seen her until two days before, when she had taken up her abode in

that miserable room; and in the course of those two days only one or two of them had even spoken to her. But the unkempt, sob-shaken figure was surrounded instantly with slatternly consolers, whose sympathy was as genuine as it was rough. No thought of quiet in connection with sickness had ever occurred to any of the women. Alice Eade, indeed, in her delirium, seemed to them to belong no longer to their world. In the midst of a clamour of lamentation and condolences Mrs. Custance passed unnoticed across the room, and knelt down on the floor beside the wretched bed.

"Oh, my poor girl!" she murmured pitifully, laying her hand gently on the thin hand on the coverlet, "oh, my poor girl!"

From the face and head that had once been so wonderfully handsome all the glow and glory of colour and youth had gone for

ever. The wild delirium which had arrested Mrs. Custance's attention in the court outside had been succeeded by the stupor of exhaustion, and the face, with every sharp outline of emaciation fearfully accentuated in unconsciousness, was a dead greyish-white, except where heavy shadows lay about the mouth, and about the closed, sunken eyes. The hair which had been the crowning beauty of the Alice Eade of Thornsdyke lay on the ragged pillow, matted and dishevelled, and even from that the light and shine were gone.

Mrs. Custance knelt beside her for a moment only. Then, with a touch and gesture indescribably gentle and pitiful, she lifted the heavy head into an easier position, and rose, turning to the noisy group of women upon whom, as her movement arrested their attention, silence fell.

"I am going to fetch a doctor," she said simply.

The woman whose one friend was the unconscious figure on the bed, and who seemed herself to occupy the same position towards it, being utterly broken down into hysterical crying and helpless lamentation, no one had anything to say for or against such a proceeding; and Mrs. Custance, making no fruitless attempt at modifying hopeless confusion, passed quickly out of the room and up the court in the direction of the parish doctor's house. The distance was not great, and she had not gone more than half-way, but she was quite breathless with haste and agitation, when she heard her husband's voice behind her and stopped involuntarily with a painful start.

"I want you, Leila," he said roughly. "Where the dickens are you running to?"

Her face changed painfully.

"There is a girl in Dunning's Court," she faltered imploringly, "she's dying, I think."

"Nonsense!" her husband interposed. "Dunning's Court! She can't do better than die, I should say, if she lives there! I want you, didn't I say?"

"If you would just let me send the doctor! It's—it's a Thornsdyke girl. I knew her very well. It's Alice Eade."

"Alice Eade!"

The echo came so sharply on her words, the look that came upon her husband's face as he uttered it was so strange and inexplicable, that Mrs. Custance stood before him in trembling silence. Dr. Custance stood motionless for a moment, his indolent face gathered into an intently considering frown. Then he said sharply:

"You needn't fetch that parish fool. I'll see the girl. Come on."

He turned in the direction from which his wife had come, before Mrs. Custance, in her astonishment, had quite grasped the meaning of his words; and he was looking back for her impatiently, when Norman Strange came out of the office, close to which they happened to be standing. He came up to them at once, evidently struck by something in their attitudes.

"Is anything the matter?" he said.

Before Mrs. Custance could do more than turn her pale, agitated face hurriedly towards him, Dr. Custance answered him.

"Alice Eade, a Thornsdyke girl, whom you may remember perhaps, is dying in Dunning's Court," he said tersely, fixing a pair of keen eyes as he spoke on Norman's face.

If there had ever rested in Dr. Custance's

mind, placed there by what he had heard in the carpenter's shop at Thornsdyke after Robert Caton's death, any possibility of question as to which of his "patients" had been indeed responsible for Alice Eade's disappearance—and in his secret soul there had been none—it must have been destroyed once and for all as he met the honest, manly shock of intense compassion and pain that had sprung into Norman's eyes, even before he turned with quick, instinctive sympathy to Mrs. Custance.

"At last," he said to her in low, moved tones; "we have found her at last, Mrs. Custance."

She shook her head sadly, and her trembling lips moved, but the words they formed, the saddest words perhaps among the many sad words of this world—"too late"—were inaudible.

"I'm going to see what can be done for her," began Dr. Custance, in a tone from which the keen interest of his earlier words had disappeared. "I don't suppose——"

Norman interposed eagerly:

"That's all right," he said. "Dying, did you say? If you will go at once, Custance, I could send you anything you want for her—medicine, food, anything of that kind."

Dr. Custance turned carelessly to his wife.

"What do you mean exactly by 'dying'? he asked; "is she sinking, delirious, unconscious, or what?"

In a few hurried, nervous words Mrs. Custance explained, and Dr. Custance took out his note-book and scribbled a few words, tearing the page out and giving it to Norman as he finished.

"You'd better send me both those," he

said. And then, as though such a course was less trouble than any other, he turned indolently away in the direction of Dunning's Court, followed by his wife.

The wildest tumult was reigning, when they reached it, in the room in which Alice Eade lay. The well-meant sympathy of the women about her had fostered the uncontrollable emotion of the sick girl's friend into a violent fit of hysterics. One or two of her consolers were crying in concert, while the others gave contradictory advice at the tops of their voices.

Dr. Custance stood for a moment in the doorway surveying the group of excited, gesticulating women, and then he glanced beyond, to where the figure on the bed moved now feebly and incessantly, uttering once more low hoarse mutterings that mingled with terrible contrast and suggestion with the

empty clamour with which the room was filled. Dr. Custance took in the situation at a glance.

"Take her out into the air, and give her something to drink," he said to the most collected of the women, slipping something into her hand, and indicating the hysterical figure in their midst with an unpleasant expression on his face. "If she wants the young woman to get better she is going the wrong way to work just now!"

He made no attempt at personally representing the case to the woman in question, but he waited calmly while the sense of his words, and—still more influential—his gift, permeated the group of women in some mysterious way. Alice Eade was nothing to them. She had passed beyond the boundaries which enclosed their miserable lives into a region where they could not

touch her. Her friend, in the violence of her emotion was hardly conscious what she did or said, and in a few minutes she yielded to the overwhelming majority, and suffered herself to be removed, the centre of the group, from the room.

Then Dr. Custance crossed the room to the bedside, his wife following timidly, and stood there looking down upon the sick girl. The stupor of exhaustion in which Mrs. Custance had left her was giving way, evidently, moment by moment, before the consuming fire of her fever, and in the hush which had fallen with the departure of the women, her quick, inarticulate mutterings seemed to rise suddenly and take possession of the quiet room. Her eyes were open now, large and brilliant in their sunken hollows, with no consciousness behind them; there was a burning patch of colour on either

cheek ; and her head moved from side to side on the pillow without a moment's intermission.

Dr. Custance bent over her, and his hands, skilful doctor's hands enough if he had ever cared to exercise their skill, moved about her with instinctive professional interest, his wife watching his face meanwhile tentatively, but with breathless anxiety. At last he stood up again.

" It's no good," he said indifferently.

Before Mrs. Custance had time to speak or move—almost before the last word passed his lips—the hoarse, incessant mutterings rose into a wild, delirious laugh, and Alice Eade flung up her arms above her head.

" That's fine ! " she said, speaking thick and fast, her unnaturally bright eyes staring straight before her, as though they saw the person she addressed. " That's fine talking, Mr. Caton, but we've all heard that before,

you know. Who's to tell me as it isn't all words? Well, there—oh, yes, you like me well enough, I suppose—there, let me go! Let me go, will you? Mrs. Custance wouldn't believe it of me. Oh, Mrs. Custance! Mrs. Custance! Mrs. Custance!"

It was the same wild, despairing cry that Mrs. Custance had heard before, and, as though it went to her very heart, she sank on her knees beside the bed and took the burning hands in hers.

"Alice," she said, "Alice, my dear, I'm here. Oh, my dear, do try, do try to know me."

For an instant, at her touch and voice, the thin fingers closed over Mrs. Custance's, as if instinctively, tighter and tighter, and the delirious voice paused. But the spirit was far away from the worn-out frame, and Alice could not know her.

"I wonder what she'd say if I told her?" the hoarse, unnatural voice went on. "There, she's that innocent! I wonder what it's like to be as soft as that?"

"Custance!"

The voice came from the landing, very low and grave, and as though the familiar presence by her had touched, though it could not recall, her wandering senses, Alice turned her head sharply in the direction from which it came, and her words stopped abruptly.

The old interest in Alice Eade—the interest that had come into being as a chivalrous, boyish impulse of protection with that long-ago revival of his better self; the interest to which circumstances had given such painful intensity, and which had dwelt with him as he passed from the old life in Thornsdyke to the new life in London—had been suddenly revived in Norman Strange, by

the news of her discovery, with that peculiar obliteration of the years that had obscured it common with such a temperament as his. With the impulsiveness of the boy of old, mingled with the grave compassion of the man of to-day, he had himself brought the drugs which Dr. Custance had wanted, intending to suggest the sick girl's immediate removal to the infirmary. Finding no one about the house—for all the otherwise unoccupied women of the court were engaged in administering Dr. Custance's prescription to Alice's friend and to themselves—he had come up the stairs, and was now standing just outside the open door full in view of the dying girl.

"Can she be moved?" he said in the same low tone as Dr. Custance came towards him. "Here——"

He was interrupted.

Born of her dim sense of familiar voices, quickened into life by who shall say what wild combination of associations, there swept across the fevered brain of the dying girl a wild, delirious fancy. With the strength which had apparently left her for ever, Alice Eade suddenly lifted herself, clutching at and supporting herself by Mrs. Custance's fragile figure with her right hand, and pointing with her left straight at Norman Strange as he faced her in the doorway, arrested alike in speech and gesture by her sudden movement. The wild, bright eyes were fastened on his fiercely, accusingly, and the figure they saw was not his. For her frenzied vision in that moment there stood on the threshold of the squalid room the figure of the man to whom she owed the tragedy of her life—the figure of Robert Caton.

"It's him!" The words were a low, quick shuddering whisper, and she shook Mrs. Custance fiercely by the shoulder as she spoke. "Look, 'Ria, it's him, I tell you! There's always one as we owes it to; there's always one as we've got to curse. That's him as did for me. Look, 'Ria, look at him well—ah!" From its terrible whisper, so weird in its suggestion of presences unseen by any but herself, her voice rose into such a shriek of loathing and execration, as she tore herself convulsively from Mrs. Custance's hands, that Norman, hardly taking in the situation, involuntarily started towards her, thinking she would surely hurt herself unless restrained. But Dr. Custance stepping instantly forward, his face curiously keen and intent, laid a hand on his arm—just in time.

At his first movement forward, the

frenzied face had stiffened suddenly into an indescribable glare of horror and fear.

"He's coming, 'Ria," she panted, clutching once more at Mrs. Custance, who knelt beside her, holding her in her arms, with a face the colour of ashes, "don't you let him touch me, or I shall kill him—I shall kill him, I tell you. 'Ria, oh, 'Ria, I want to kill him; ain't it fair now, ain't it fair? I owe it all to him, I tell you! I owe it all to him!"

Her voice, a dreadful frenzied shriek now, stopped suddenly, and a ghastly change came over her face. Then the shaking hand, with which she pointed still at Norman —on whose arm Dr. Custance kept a detaining grip, as though to force him still to face the delirious girl—dropped heavily, and she fell back into Mrs. Custance's arms.

Robert Caton and his victim had met indeed.

CHAPTER III.

Six hours later darkness had fallen, and Norman Strange, closing behind him the door of the house in which he lived, paused for a moment on the step and drew a long breath as if that still, mysterious touch which coming night cannot wholly lose, even in London, were grateful to him. Then he turned down the street, and walked in the direction of Gloucester Terrace.

Norman's face was very pale and tired, and there was a strange indefinable expression about it, as of a man who has been through deep waters of thought or of feeling—possibly both. It looked strangely older since the

morning; older and graver. The haggard intentness which it had worn lately had disappeared, and in its place there was a quiet, settled sadness. In the midst of all his business and his desperate absorption, a touch laid upon him by the great fundamental mysteries of humanity ignored so often in the eager struggle of individual life, the scene of which he had been a witness that afternoon, had brought him face to face with thoughts that had stirred the depths of his nature.

The link with the past, which he had taken with him from Thornsdyke into his renewed life, had been the thought of Alice Eade. She had brought it close to him again now in her death, and the inexorable connection between past and present of which the tragedy of her life and death were eloquent, had spoken to his soul.

Throughout the hours that had followed on her death he had gone about the work that waited him, clear-headed and indefatigable as usual, but with a strange background to all his thoughts; a background of the tremendous realities of life; realities among which stood out for him with terrible distinctness the old inexorable law, "Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." He thought of the dead man, whose act had lived relentlessly to its inevitable end; he thought of the dead girl, whose life had been one dreadful sequence of seed and fruit; and then the individual figures faded from him, obliterated by the mysterious immensity of the truth to which they witnessed. He had told Mrs. Custance in the morning that Stella Chisholm must have heard his story. He had believed that the change in her manner to him was due to her knowledge of

that black line in his record, and the conviction had been bitter to him beyond all words. The pain of losing her had lost in it all possibility of dignity, and became a hardly endurable torture of fruitless regret and remorse. But now, in the higher, wider atmosphere which had risen suddenly around him, he seemed to see, with a certain solemn acceptance, the true relations between his own past and present. He, too, he told himself, was held in that great circle of retribution which no man can fathom or explain. He, too, was reaping the harvest he had sowed.

And now, in the quiet of the evening, quiet had fallen on his spirit as he walked along the empty streets, to keep the promise he had made to Stella Chisholm in the morning, and leave at her door the catalogue she wanted. The exaltation and solemnity of mind inseparable from the thoughts

through which he had passed, intensified in him by his imaginativeness of temperament, had subsided, as all such moods must ; but, as they may and should, they had left their traces. He was subdued, as only so ardent a nature so disciplined can be, and he was very sad. But he was strong and brave.

He had not walked fast, for he was physically tired with the long day's work, accomplished in the midst of an incessant strain of feeling, and the clock struck nine as he rang Mrs. Alison's bell. The door being opened, he put the book into the servant's hands, telling her simply to give it to Miss Chisholm, and was turning away when the woman stopped him.

"Miss Chisholm said I was to ask you to please to come in, sir, if you called," she said.

Norman turned to her with a quick movement of surprise.

"To come in?" he repeated. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, sir," was the answer. And Norman entered the house in silence.

A soft sound of music floated down from the drawing-room as he went upstairs, and, as the door was opened and his name announced, it ceased suddenly, and Stella rose from the piano. She was alone in the room, and she did not come forward to meet him.

"You wanted to speak to me?" he said, coming quietly towards her and accepting the reminder conveyed, as he thought, by her omission of any form of greeting, that they had already met in the course of the day. He spoke very gravely and distantly, but with none of the restless tentativeness

that had characterised his speech to her for many days now. There was a moment's pause before she said :

" I thought I should like to know about the Duke."

Her tone was very gentle and there was a little uncertainty and hesitation about the words which was most unusual in her. Norman was conscious of a vague sense of surprise, and he, too, paused a moment before he answered her.

" I am glad to say it is settled," he said in the same quiet tone. " He will come."

" I am very glad indeed."

The words came from her quickly, softly, almost propitiatingly, and, as she spoke, she sat down on the music-stool. If the movement was intended as a tacit invitation to him to sit down likewise, he did not avail himself of it. He remained standing by the

piano and he did not answer her. He was in the position of a man who, expecting to find himself face to face with a barrier, finds that barrier removed; who knows nothing of the ground thus opened to him, and who stands in the dark, not knowing how to move.

"It is a very good thing, don't you think? You have every one you wanted, now, haven't you?"

"Every one, I think."

The words had come from her in the same unusual tone, and he had answered her almost mechanically. Her next words—an eager, sympathetic question about a branch of the work from which she had lately withdrawn herself—demanded a longer response from him, and as he gave, always with the same subdued restraint of tone and manner, the details for which she asked, the subtle

influence of the mental atmosphere created by her manner stole, all unconsciously to himself, about him. It was an atmosphere which in its gentle freedom from all contention and all hardness harmonised perfectly with his own softened and subdued tone of mind; and, as Stella passed on from one point to another, still with that uncertainty and hesitation that had characterised her first words, and with little pauses in the conversation which she nevertheless sustained, its influence strengthened round him moment by moment. There came at last a silence longer than its predecessors, and he moved as if to take his leave.

"I mustn't keep you any longer," he said. Then he, too, paused. The spell of her unusual womanliness and gentleness was strong upon him—all undefined and unrecognised, indeed—and under that spell he spoke.

"Miss Chisholm," he said, speaking very low and quietly, and standing straight before her—she had risen from the music-stool on his movement to take leave—"don't think me impertinent, please, for speaking of——" he faltered, and then continued rather hurriedly, "of things that are an insult to you. I only want to say that I had no right, I know, to let you make my acquaintance on false pretences; and to ask you, if you can, to forgive me that. For the rest I know well that it is not a question of forgiveness; that what is past must always stand between us. But it would be something to me—more than I deserve, I know—if I might think that you know how I regret that I should have left you to hear the story of my life from any one except myself."

Stella had listened to him standing still and straight, one hand resting on the piano,

her face paling a little as though she commanded it with an effort. Her voice as she answered him was low, as though from the same cause.

"I would rather, too, have heard it from you," she said. "But you are quite mistaken if you think I have known it long. I only knew this morning." She paused abruptly, as though her self-command was slipping from her, and then quite suddenly it all gave way at once and she faced him impetuously, her whole face aglow with feeling and indignation. "Oh, how could you?" she cried vehemently. "How could you think me such a wretched thing as that? Oh, men are stupid, utterly stupid, I do think. Do you think that a woman understands nothing, nothing? Do you think she can never see when a life is strong and splendid? Do you think that she can never think of the

blackness of temptation as a measure of the victory won over it, but that she must stop short always at the blackness itself? Why, if I had known this story from the first I should only have been the readier to like you. How could you be so unjust, so unjust to me?"

It was the protest she had uttered to Mrs. Custance in the morning intensified a thousand times, as her pain and indignation were intensified a thousand times, in the thought of his misjudgement of her. She was face to face now with what cut her to the quick, and, carried completely away by the intensity of her feelings, her voice rang, as she uttered the last words, in a cry that struck on the ears of the man who loved her with a thrill that shook him through and through. A flash passed across Norman's sad, pale

face, a flash that broke up its grave lines into a very passion of incredulity and hope, and he made one step towards her.

"Unjust!" he cried; and the ring of his voice seemed to catch up that thrill in hers and set the very air vibrating with emotion. "Unjust! what is it to you whether or no I am just to you? If you don't despise me you dislike me. If my story has not come between us something else has. You have wished to make me understand that you could never care for me. Stella! Stella!" he continued, the fire of his feelings waxing stronger and fiercer as she let her face fall on her hands with an indescribably womanly gesture of negation, "isn't that true? Is it possible—is it possible that I have been mistaken? Stella!" He was close to her now, not touching her, but with every nerve tense with the passion

that rang in his voice. "Unjust to you! I love you! I love you with all my heart and soul! Stella, is it possible? You don't —you can't love me!"

Stella turned to him suddenly and burst into a passion of tears.

"I do!" she cried. "I do, I do!"

Half an hour later Mrs. Alison's drawing-room was very quiet. The two low, happy voices had ceased for a moment at last as Stella leant back in her chair with a long, low sigh, half shyness and half content, and met the brown eyes opposite her; met them and let her own eyes answer them without the help or hindrance of words. Mrs. Alison was dining out; she had not come back yet, and if she had delayed until midnight she would have interrupted all too soon. They had so much to say to one another. "I love you," "I have loved you,"

"I shall always love you," "How I love you," and "Why I love you," are themes each one of which is capable of infinite variation and developement, for their key-note is the keynote of the noblest depths of man's nature.

All that Stella knew of her reasons for her conduct during the past few weeks, Norman knew before that first half-hour was over. But to Stella herself it had all become vague and indefinite in the glamour of the present. The experience through which she had passed was so great, and so shaking, the change it had wrought in her—the change from denial and suppression of her heart's love to its avowal and satisfaction—was so fundamental, that all details were blotted out in it. She had been carried forward, as it were, on a great wave of her life's tide, and it was not ingratitude, it was

the rush and sweep of sensation, so to speak, that obliterated from her mind in that first hour the remembrance of that helping hand, without which the wave would surely have gone over her.

And to Norman, as he sat there, content in the perfection of the moment to look into her eyes in silence, life had changed in that half-hour, or rather in the instant's realisation that had preceded it, as life can only change when for realisation of one phase of that human life the whole of which is never to be conceived of by any man at one and the same moment, is substituted realisation of another and an opposing phase. He had been face to face with the solemn mystery of retribution. He was face to face now with another mystery, far more bewildering in its beauty ; a mystery of which no man can at once feel the power and

reason as to its meaning—the mystery of love. For him, too, in that first hour, as for Stella, details were not.

As he went away home at last, Mrs. Alison's placidly accepted nephew-in-law, a changed man in a changed world, with a changed life before him, he did not even remember in his radiance that in their happy, eager talk, he had never asked, and she had never said, who it was who had, after all, told her the story of his past. There is a reverse, doubtless, to the old rhyme that traces the loss of a kingdom to the want of a nail; the timely introduction of a nail may have saved a kingdom before now. But it is improbable that such a possibility would find a place in the thoughts of the king, unless the connection of ideas was explained to him, very elaborately indeed. Kings—especially kings so newly crowned

as Norman—have so much to occupy them. The details leading to accession — when that accession is as sudden and dazzling as it is utterly unhoped for — must inevitably be blotted out in the absorbing interest and glory of possession.

CHAPTER IV.

"THOSE are the latest details of the scheme as it stands at present — an experiment. Time, and nothing else, can justify it, and I leave it to time with absolute confidence in the result."

The Long Street office was not a royal apartment, nor were there any signs about it of the presence of royalty in the ordinary sense of the word. Norman Strange sat at the writing-table, and opposite him sat a representative of a daily paper.

But it was not for nothing that Norman, on the evening before, had entered into possession of his kingdom. There is a kind

of sovereignty which is not always to be found where there is blood royal, and which is, fortunately, occasionally to be found where there is not; the sovereignty of glowing enthusiasm; of that buoyancy of spirit which looks upon all obstacles as made merely to be conquered; of radiant anticipation, in right of success achieved, of success yet to come. With this sovereignty Norman's every gesture, every tone of his voice, and every line of his face were instinct on this the morning following his accession.

The interview which was now drawing to a conclusion was the first piece of business that had come to hand at his arrival at the office—it had, indeed, interrupted an interview of quite another kind between himself and Aubrey Chisholm—and he had thrown himself into it with an ardour and

spirit of which he had exhibited no trace now for weeks.

The interviewer applied himself with energy to his note-book on Norman's final words, scribbled for a moment in silence, and then rose to take his leave. And, left to himself, Norman, as though it mattered not at all to him on what particular detail his glow of vitality expended itself, threw himself upon a pile of unopened letters lying upon his writing-table.

An hour had passed; the letters were all opened, and the answers to be returned noted upon them, and Norman had passed on to other business, when a hesitating tap fell upon the door.

"Come in," cried Norman cheerily. There was a moment's pause, and then the door opened, and Mrs. Custance stood on the threshold. She was wearing a veil, and

it was a thick veil, too, but it hardly concealed the traces on her face of many tears. Her eyes were red and heavy, like the eyes of a woman who has cried instead of sleeping through the night; her face was smaller than ever in its pallor, and her mouth was unsteady and quivering. Norman had not seen her since her husband had taken her away from Dunning's Court on the previous day; and as he sprang up now and went to meet her, the casual tone which constant intercourse had brought to the friendly courtesy with which he always treated the most insignificant little woman he knew, was modified by a natural respect for the distress in which he had seen her last. He did not understand the pathos of her face, but he saw that she had been crying, and her presence revived in his mind the tragedy of yesterday.

But the tide of emotion by which that tragedy had been swept under in his thoughts had also carried him to a great distance from it—a distance not to be retraced. He could remember it and respect it, but he could not feel it as he had done not twenty-four hours before.

"Good morning!" he said gently, as she murmured an apology for interrupting him. "I'm not busy, thanks. I hope you are pretty well this morning?"

He looked kindly down into her face as he spoke—the face which, in reality almost the same age as his own, looked so much the elder of the two—and her eyes were raised to his with a certain intentness as though his voice, to which no sympathy could restore the heavy tonelessness of yesterday, had arrested her attention. She dropped them at his last words, as though

the personal enquiry embarrassed her; as, indeed, any reference to herself was apt to do.

"I—I am quite well, thank you," she answered.

"We were too late, after all," he said gently. "I cannot tell you how grieved I am."

Mrs. Custance turned her face away. It was quivering pitifully.

"It is so dreadful," she murmured.

"It is very dreadful."

The assent was grave and reverent, but the intensity of yesterday's realisation was absent.

"Will you tell me?" murmured Mrs. Custance; "did you know — have you known always—who it was?"

"Yes."

A long, quivering sigh came from her—

a sigh in which the reverent sense of the all-obliterating touch of death blended with a pitiful realisation of the earthly fruits of the life that had preceded it. And the sigh was followed by a silence. With Norman it was a silence of respect only, and he thought that it would be "better for the little woman" to have her thoughts gently turned into another channel.

"I have been polishing up the arrangements for the twenty-third," he said pleasantly. "The farewell meeting is fixed for the twenty-third. Have you heard? And we are to have the Duke. We shall go off with a magnificent flourish of trumpets, at any rate."

He smiled brightly as he spoke, and again, as though the ring of his voice, the unmistakable ring of radiant satisfaction, had caught her ear, dull as it was in

most cases, the blue eyes scanned his face eagerly; furtively, though, this time.

"I am glad," she said rather stupidly.

"It's capital, isn't it?" he returned buoyantly. "And I've had a splendid account from Elton this morning, too! Things seem to be going on swimmingly over there; everything is going swimmingly, in fact."

He paused, and she repeated in the same mechanical manner:

"I am glad."

It would have made no difference to Norman if she had remained silent. As a matter of fact, he hardly heard her, and the words were hardly uttered when he broke out suddenly, impelled by an exuberant impulse to confide in any one who was likely to listen to him.

"We're old friends, are we not?" he

said with an apologetic laugh. It would have been a very recent acquaintance, indeed, that he could not have taken to his heart as an old friend that morning, and that laugh seemed to say so. "I'm going to tell you something about myself, and ask you to congratulate me. I'm going to marry Miss Stella Chisholm." Nothing in Norman's eyes could enhance the effect of the simple fact, and he added nothing to it.

On his first words Mrs. Custance's eyes had been lifted to his face with a sudden assurance that only complete self-forgetfulness could have given to her frightened glance. And when he waited for her words she spoke none, simply looking at him—with eyes from which her recent tears had washed away the little expression they ever possessed—as though the suddenness of the announcement

had deprived her of her never ready powers of speech. That effect upon her of his words satisfied Norman as well as any other, her reception of them being a matter of absolute indifference to him, and he went on, radiantly:

"No one can be more surprised than I am. One can't talk about the how and why of such things—I can't, at least! There's only the fact itself. You know her a little, Mrs. Custance; I needn't try to tell you what I've won. You'll congratulate me, I know!"

Any congratulation is music to the ears of a man in love, and he held out his hand to her, smiling at the agitation that such a demand, he knew, must cause her. And with the necessity for speech and movement, Mrs. Custance's ordinary nervous self-consciousness did indeed return to her.

"I do!" she answered hurriedly and incoherently, rather letting him take her hand than giving it to him in her embarrassment. "Oh, I do, I do, indeed!"

"I knew you would!" he answered lightly, stooping as he spoke to pick up a letter she had let fall in her agitation. "Is this for me?" he added, smiling.

The envelope in his hand bore his name upon it in Dr. Custance's handwriting, and Mrs. Custance started guiltily as though she had forgotten something.

"I—ought—it is—I was to bring it to you," she said hurriedly. "Dr. Custance told me to bring it and to take back an answer. What shall I say?"

With a courteous word of apology and a slight smile at her anxious precipitancy, Norman opened the envelope and glanced hastily over the letter.

"DEAR STRANGE," he read,

"There is a little matter of private business on which I wish to have some talk with you. As it is strictly private I think you would prefer that I should not approach it at the office. Shall I find you if I call at your rooms this afternoon at two o'clock?

"Yours truly,

"ARNOLD CUSTANCE."

A passing wonder rose in Norman's mind that Dr. Custance should wish to introduce his private affairs at a time so full of pressing work. The rather curious tone of the letter did not strike him, nor did it occur to him that the words "private business" were not applied, and might refer to the recipient as easily as to the writer of the letter. He simply took for granted, in a manner that spoke volumes as to his gradually and un-

consciously received impression of Dr. Custance's character, that that gentleman was in difficulties of some sort. It was infinitely easier for him in his present frame of mind to say yes than to say no, and he decided that he could easily arrange to be at home for an hour in the middle of the day.

"Will you tell Dr. Custance that I shall be delighted to see him at two o'clock?" he said, looking from the letter to Mrs. Custance as she waited for his words. "But did you intend to go home, Mrs. Custance? Shall I send a note by a messenger?"

"I am going home, thank you," she answered, offering him her hand hesitatingly and awkwardly; the easy exits and entrances customary among the workers connected with the scheme, who met and parted twenty times a day, were matters of overwhelming difficulty to Mrs. Custance.

"Thanks!" returned Norman lightly. "Then you will tell Dr. Custance."

He paused a moment, and then, out of the fulness of that beatitude which leads to universal graciousness, the king in his condescension smiled upon the insignificant little woman before him, of whose close connection with his accession he had no idea whatever, and said, with that easy pleasantness which emphasizes distances as nothing else can do:

"And may I tell Miss Chisholm that an old friend of mine is pleased?"

The insignificant little woman looked up into the royal countenance quite quietly, and said in a low voice:

"Yes, please."

Perhaps it was because she said only the two words that she said them without hesitancy.

CHAPTER V.

Left by himself for the second time that morning, Norman despatched the business interrupted by Mrs. Custance, and prepared to go and superintend in other departments.

He and Stella had made no appointment for the morning. He was to dine at Gloucester Terrace that evening, and for the rest he had said only: "I shall see you in the morning."

It was with a consciousness, too supremely happy for haste, that his business of the morning would surely bring him into Stella's presence sooner or later, that Norman planned his movements now with

reference solely to that business, and rather gloried in the fact.

In his secret heart he was conscious of picturing their meeting as likely to take place at a ladies' committee with which he had an appointment. But she was not there. The meeting over, he glanced involuntarily up and down the street as he went on his way, looking for the girlish figure which might at any moment be close to him. His next destination was the house in which the man Reynolds, his right hand among the colonists themselves, rented a couple of rooms, and just before going in he looked again up and down the street. The next moment the door of Reynolds's room was opened to him by Reynolds's wife, and beyond her, sitting on a dilapidated chair with a little girl on her knee, was Stella herself.

Stella, who was not taken by surprise, was comparatively speaking mistress of the situation. Perhaps it was the sudden rush of soft colour to her face that disturbed her complete self-possession.

"Good morning!" she said softly, as Norman, after a rather hurried greeting to Mrs. Reynolds, came rapidly towards her.

"Good morning!" he responded rather incoherently. He had been so thoroughly prepared to meet her—anywhere else. Why anywhere else rather than in so likely a place as Mrs. Reynolds's room it would have been hard to say.

"I—I didn't expect to see you here!" he said.

"You asked me to come."

The words, very softly spoken, entirely deprived Norman of what little power of speech the meeting itself had left him, and

Mrs. Reynolds took up the word. She was a thin, tired-looking woman, with an anxious face.

"And I'm sure, sir, it was kind of you," she said, "and kind of Miss Stella to come." She darted a sharp glance from one to the other as she spoke. "Miss Stella she's talked very sensible and very sympathising, too, and I've come to see as it's better, after all, as the things should go." She looked round the room at the miserable bits of furniture that made the poor room home to her; and Norman, brought to himself by this new train of ideas, answered instantly and very kindly:

"I'm very glad indeed, Mrs. Reynolds." He thought it better to add nothing that might possibly clash with Stella's arguments, and there was a moment's pause, broken by Mrs. Reynolds:

"You come to see my master, sir, I expect," she said. "Lor! and he'll be fine and vexed to miss you. He's out."

Norman had come to see Reynolds, and Reynolds being out, there was nothing to detain him. Stella's visit was also over apparently; as a matter of fact she had spent a whole hour in accomplishing the piece of work Norman had asked her to undertake; and a minute or two later they went away together.

It was curious talk for such recently engaged lovers—the talk in which they were absorbed before they reached the end of the street. In her reaction from that aloofness of attitude towards the scheme which had been one of the forms assumed by her resentment against her position with regard to Norman, Stella did not now know how to take interest enough in it. For her

as for Norman himself it was the object on which all her happiness, and all the zest of life which sprang from that happiness, expended itself.

And to both there had come a sudden realisation of the near approach of the consummation of all the labour and thought of the past months. Each had worked lately under a heavy load of pain, acknowledged or unacknowledged, with little capacity for excitement. To each of them in the reaction, the twenty-fifth of April—the date on which the colonists were to leave England — had suddenly come very close. Only three weeks intervened now, and three weeks seemed as nothing to them.

Stella was on her way to the other side of the parish, and Norman having—or making, for he was only human — a spare half-hour, walked with her to her

destination. There was not a second's pause in the eager talk between them, of the scheme; the work still to be done in the next three weeks; the meeting to be held on the twenty-third; and a hundred other points. It was not until the last moment, when they had smiled their good-byes at one another, and the door was actually opened to admit Stella, that it occurred to Norman to say hastily, and with a slightly amused smile:

"By-the-bye, I've a message for you from Mrs. Custance. I am to say that she is very pleased."

Stella's face changed slightly, as though the words reminded her of something, but the woman she had come to see was waiting at the door, so she nodded and smiled at him and disappeared.

It was nearly two hours later, and past

two o'clock when Norman let himself into his own rooms and hastily opened the door of his sitting-room.

"I was afraid so," he exclaimed, as he shut it behind him. "I've kept you, Custance?"

The room looked very comfortable, and if Dr. Custance had been waiting long, he had apparently not been waiting impatiently. He was sitting in a particularly restful and contemplative attitude in the easiest chair, and though he changed his pose, he did not rise on Norman's entrance.

"I told your man that you expected me," he said. "I am in no particular hurry."

There was something about his tone which was not quite usual to it. It was by no means that of a man who had come—as Norman believed his visitor to have come—to borrow money; and Norman

glanced at him almost without knowing why. He was suddenly conscious of an impulse to come to the point at once, and he sat down, saying pleasantly:

"We won't waste time, though; it's rather a precious commodity just at present. What's the business, doctor?"

Dr. Custance did not move. His legs were crossed, and he was leaning easily back in his chair. His face was as indolent as ever, and the keenness of his eyes, as they rested on Norman's face, was not perceptible beneath their heavy lids.

"It is not particularly pleasant business," he said; "but you are probably not unprepared for it. You understood, no doubt, to what my note alluded."

Norman's first sense of something unexpected about Dr. Custance deepened. He had thought that he quite understood

the nature of the "private business" alluded to in Dr. Custance's note; but he was conscious now of having made a mistake.

"On the contrary, I am quite in the dark," he answered, speaking with an involuntary access of seriousness. "Will you explain?"

There was a hardly perceptible interval, and Dr. Custance answered him.

"Mr. Strange," he said, "do you remember the circumstances under which you left Thornsdyke?"

Norman had started slightly at the unwonted formality of the address, and he looked for a moment at his visitor as though in search of a clue to it. Then he answered gravely:

"No man is likely to forget one of the most painful experiences of his life, Dr. Custance."

"Have you any idea what was said of you on your departure?"

"Said of me?"

"It was said," said Dr. Custance in the same dry, quiet tone, "that you and Robert Caton had quarrelled over a girl in the village—Alice Eade; that you were responsible for her disappearance——".

"Custance!"

"That you were responsible for her disappearance, and that Caton resented that fact; that high words between you on the subject led to blows, and that Caton finally met his death at your hand."

"Good God!"

The two words came from Norman slowly and heavily. He was too astounded and too entirely incapable of grasping such monstrous gossip in connection with himself, even for resentment. For a moment or

two he sat motionless—watched always by those sleepy, grey eyes—and then he turned impulsively upon Dr. Custance.

"Why was I not told of this at the time?" he demanded.

"I hardly see what end would have been served by that," returned Dr. Custance with a slight, sarcastic smile.

"I should have disproved it."

"Possibly." The word came with the same slight smile. "But it is sometimes difficult to disprove the truth, Mr. Strange."

"The truth!"

The echo came short and sharp, like the report of a pistol, and as he spoke the word there passed across Norman's face such a flash as in his younger days would have been the herald of a fierce outbreak. But Norman was a man now, with a man's self-control, and his face, though it was pale

was set like iron as he said, in a voice so controlled as to be absolutely suppressed:

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this," was the answer; and Dr. Custance changed his position at last, uncrossing his legs, and leaning slightly forward, as though the moment were supreme to him: "When you and I met in London after an interval of five years, your past was comfortably buried, and you were in the eminently satisfactory and respectable position of a rising and moneyed man. Your first proceeding on the renewal of our acquaintance was to give, through me — the only man, perhaps, who might fairly be supposed to know of matters likely to throw discredit on the prosperous future before you—a large sum of money to an obscure charity in which no man, unbiased, would be likely to take an interest. In

informing me of your generous intention you took particular pains, as you doubtless recollect, to inform me also that you gave it as some sort of atonement for your past life. The gratuitous character of this information, as well as the proceeding as a whole, puzzled me considerably — for I had paid no attention to Thornsdyke gossip —until I came upon the clue to it yesterday. You thought it possible that I might suspect the truth which Alice Eade proclaimed before she died, and your donation to the Essendine trust was hush-money."

Norman had sat quite motionless, his hand as it rested on the table clenched until the knuckles were quite white, the expression of his face changing from moment to moment from rigid self-control to astonishment, incredulity, indignation. Finally, as Dr. Custance finished, he sprang

to his feet, his whole face aglow with fierce horror and repudiation.

"Good heavens, man!" he cried passionately. "What are you talking about? The truth which Alice Eade—why, she was delirious."

"She was not delirious!"

"Not delirious!" The words were a fierce, hoarse cry. "Custance, for Heaven's sake! I knew, your wife knew, you as a doctor must have known better than either of us, that she was raving!"

"I, as a medical man must, as you say, know best, and I am prepared to swear that she was not!"

There was a moment's dead silence. Norman stood grasping the back of his chair, just as he had risen in his excitement, looking down upon the other with eyes that seemed literally to blaze with speechless

incredulity as he strove to master all the significance of the situation. Dr. Custance watched him, some of the indolence gone now from his face, leaving its expression still masked, however, as though one veil had lifted only to reveal others behind. He was allowing time for the meaning of his words to make its full effect, and when he spoke again it was in a different tone—sharp and incisive.

"I will come to the point at once," he said. "I know the truth and you know the truth, and we need not discuss it further. If you and I can come to an arrangement no one else need be any the wiser, and that, I take it, is the main thing to be considered. Now, I've not the faintest intention of posing as a moralist. Every man to his taste, by all means; but every man for himself also. You have called the tune; no doubt you are

prepared to pay the piper. You want what I can promise you, and as a man of the world you naturally don't expect me to give it for nothing."

Out of the haze that had enveloped them so long, the potentialities of his position had dawned upon Dr. Custance at last; dawned upon him, needing only manipulation to make of them actualities. The delirious words of Alice Eade—words which he well knew to be delirious—had been for him, as it were, the key to the cypher which had baffled him so persistently, and that key once in his hand the rest was easy. Such scrupulousness as he had ever possessed the habits of his life had not tended to strengthen. He had spent the winter tantalised by his inability to hit upon the means—which yet seemed close to his hand—by which some of the money by which

he was surrounded might become his own. In what shape soever those means had finally revealed themselves to him, he would have used them unhesitatingly. They presented themselves in the guise of blackmail to be levied on Norman Strange as the price of a secret created for that purpose, and Dr. Custance acted accordingly.

"Are you inviting me to bargain with you for silence?"

Norman spoke very slowly, almost quietly.

"That is the state of the case exactly," answered Dr. Custance.

Norman was standing between his visitor and the door, and he stepped back.

"Have the goodness to leave my room," he said quietly. "There is enough that is black in my past, I know, but there is no shadow of foundation for the monstrous

assertions you have made. You can speak or be silent as you choose."

"Ah!" commented Dr. Custance, another veil lifting from his face and leaving his mouth hard and intent. "It is a mistake to be hasty. Reflect a moment. You are by way of being a public man in these days. Your name has been in all the papers, and one or two of them have alluded to you as a speculator. A properly vouched for and authentic paragraph to your discredit, chapter and verse duly given, would be jumped at in several quarters. The story which I can tell is not a desirable story to get about on the very eve of a philanthropic enterprise with the mainstay of that enterprise for its hero. I believe"—another veil lifted from the face, sharp and insolent by this time—"I believe that you have had a good deal to say down at St. Fabian's on the morality question.

Your colonists, the men who are leaving their homes at your instigation, have heard your lectures on the subject, I take it. How will they accept such a story with one of themselves, so to speak, for heroine and their moral leader for——"

He was interrupted. Norman, his calm all broken up, was standing over him, his face working passionately. A sudden overwhelming realisation of the possibilities suggested had shaken him through and through.

"Custance!" he cried fiercely, "stop! You know, by Heaven you must know, that there is no story! These men have pinned their faith to me; with most of them it is their trust in me that is leading them to begin their lives afresh. If that trust should be destroyed, the colony would be doomed before it started—it never would

start. You know what such men are. You know that the merest rumour of such a character with a man of our class and a woman of theirs concerned is enough to fire them, and once started, Heaven knows what irretrievable harm might not be done before I could choke it out. Think what's at stake, man!"

Norman's breath came thick and fast, and he was white to the very lips. Dr. Custance surveyed him for a moment, and thought cynically that there was no fool like an excitable fool. Then he said drily:

"That is precisely the point I am pressing you to consider. You have stated the case perfectly. If this story is skilfully put about you will be unable to put in any further appearance at St. Fabian's. You will be hooted in the streets. Whether

you will continue to be welcome at committee meetings; whether the capitalists before whom you have posed as a social reformer will continue to feel their trust safely reposed in you, is an open question perhaps. But there is no manner of doubt that the ignorant men whose faith in the experiment before them is based on their faith in you will not retain the one when they lose the other. The colony, as you say, will be doomed. It remains with you to decide whether it is to be doomed or not."

"Do you mean that you are using those poor fellows and all their hopes and chances in life as a weapon against me?"

"One weapon is like another to me, my dear fellow! I am a practical man, and I use the one I find ready to my hand."

A wild exclamation of passionate incredulity and defiance broke from Norman. The whole thing was becoming to him like some hideous nightmare, so utterly incredible to his straightforward soul was the position assumed by Dr. Custance, the man he had known and rather liked for years; so inexpressibly horrible was the position into which he himself was being forced.

"There is no story!" he cried, and his passionate repetition of his earlier words rang with the desperation of a man at bay. "The whole thing is a monstrous fabrication, and I believe you know it. There is no proof——"

"There is no proof of your innocence," interrupted Dr. Custance, rising at last and confronting him, his eyes wide open now and glittering like steel. "Go over

all I have said to you and you will find proof enough of your guilt."

For a moment the two men stood face to face, looking one another in the eyes. Then, with an indescribable gesture of repulsion and bewilderment, Norman turned away, propping his forehead on his clenched hands as his elbows rested on the mantelpiece by which he stood.

There was a silence. Dr. Custance was not the man to weaken his effects by any undue haste. He had landed his victim between the horns of a dilemma from which there was no escape, and that victim's contemplation of the position was eminently calculated to bring about the result he intended to achieve. He walked to the window and stood there calmly looking out.

Norman, meanwhile, was wrestling fiercely with a confusion of mind, to which

every attempt at grasping and realising facts brought only greater confusion still. The shock had taken him so entirely unawares, the thought of danger to the scheme as springing from his own past life had so shaken and unnerved him, coming as it did at a moment when his enthusiasm and excitement were at their highest and most hopeful, that all his sounder judgement seemed to desert him for the moment, leaving his imaginative impulsiveness master of the situation. He tried to analyse the evidence brought against him by Dr. Custance, and it rose to overwhelming proportions. He tried to estimate the effect upon the scheme of so scandalous a rumour and the dreadful spectre of possible failure, and all that it involved rose before him, and he could neither think nor reason.

At last, with a desperate reaction against the tumult of conflicting emotions within him, he turned abruptly towards Dr. Custance, one hand gripping the mantelpiece, his face haggard and defiant.

"I must think," he cried hoarsely, as though in addressing Dr. Custance he was suddenly making a stand against himself. "I tell you I must think. For Heaven's sake, leave me alone."

Dr. Custance turned and scanned his face intently and deliberately. What he read there decided him that to force an answer from his victim at that moment might be to lose all the advantage he had gained; and on that advantage as it stood he was well satisfied to pause.

"There is no hurry," he said coolly. "You will not find that any amount of thought will alter the position. Think it

over by all means. I will give you three days."

A few minutes later Norman was alone, his face buried on his arms as they rested on the table.

CHAPTER VI.

It had been a typical April day of rain and sunshine, and at about five o'clock in the afternoon the sun, shining suddenly out in a broken, watery sky, was shedding its light in long, level rays, bright and dazzling with that peculiar, gleaming brilliancy characteristic of the circumstances. The long room in the warehouse in Peel Yard, St. Fabian's, temporarily dedicated to the services of the Essendine scheme, was lighted by three windows facing almost due west, and from each of these three windows, consequently, a band of sunshine slanted across the floor and down the opposite wall,

glorifying impartially everything that lay in its way.

The door of the room was open. All the afternoon it had opened and shut incessantly as people came and went and came back again—came back invariably with one question on their lips: "Any more news?"—and eventually some one had put a weight against it and it stood now fixed open. A very little thing out of the ordinary course will originate a wholesale impression of unusualness. In that door, open instead of as usual shut, there started a suggestion of something out of the common—of some strange excitement in the air. The suggestion was strengthened in all parts of the room by the mute eloquence of sundry other inanimate details. Here and there, in the sunshine and in the shadow, lay piles of clothing and miscellaneous objects obviously waiting attention, and waiting it in

vain ; half filled packing-cases stood neglected instead of being, as usual, the centre of a trio or quartet of busy workers. And it was consummated in the little group of men and women drawn together in the middle of the room.

There were seven or eight of them altogether; three ladies, two of them obviously of the energetic spinster type, the other a pleasant little married woman whose husband was one of Norman Strange's warmest adherents. The rest of the group consisted mainly of young men workers for the scheme. The unfinished work around them, about which under ordinary circumstances they would have been moving hurriedly to and fro, was evidently quite forgotten in some new, common, and all-absorbing interest; and in each one of those faces, alike in nothing else, there was the

same expression of excitement and expectancy, not untinged with anxiety.

"I suppose there is no doubt that it is true?" said one of the young men, restlessly. He was not a particularly strong-minded young man, and he had made the same observation at least twenty times before in the course of the afternoon, coming in and out of the long room with little other perceptible object in view. It was significant of the interest attaching to the question in the minds of those to whom it was addressed that it was still apparently worth while to answer it.

"Strange himself told Wheeler, when he asked him to see to things down here this morning, that there was something wrong with Elton. There's not a doubt about it, I'm afraid. I thought Strange would have been down before this!"

The speaker glanced anxiously towards the door, and his example was followed, evidently instinctively, by every pair of eyes in the group. Then the elder of the two unmarried ladies observed :

"It will all have to be put off, of course, whatever is finally arranged. It is a terrible misfortune!"

"Postponement will be a great trial to the courage and hopefulness of the colonists, but it is inevitable, I'm afraid," assented one of the men.

"Mr. Strange is sure to have something to propose," put in his wife cheerfully. "The committee was to meet at two, wasn't it? I can't think why he isn't here. I do wish he would come!"

The words were echoed in one form or another by every one who heard them, and the faces grew a shade more eager and

excited as though the mere expression of their expectancy had intensified it. The young man who had questioned the accuracy of the news by which they were so much agitated, turned away and strolled to the door as though the impatiently awaited arrival would be accelerated by being watched for. Then he strolled back to the group looking at his watch.

"It's five o'clock!" he announced.

The next moment there was a quick step outside the door, and with a simultaneous movement everybody turned in that direction as Norman Strange passed through the open doorway and came towards them.

"What news?" he said brightly, taking up the last word of the chorus of eager welcome and anxious interrogation with which he was received. "Good news on the whole, decidedly."

"Isn't it true, then?" was the excited enquiry.

"Yes!" he answered promptly, with the same spirited ring in his voice. "Oh, yes, it's true enough! Elton has bolted with all the money drafted to him. And a lucky thing it is," he continued, his eyes brightening and that ring in his voice growing stronger as dismayed ejaculations rose around him, "a lucky thing it is, as he was that kind of gentleman, that he has let us know it now instead of a little later. We've lost some money and a good deal of time, but that's the extent of the damage he's done us as things stand, and it's comparatively easily retrieved."

He had confirmed their worst fears; he had told them practically that the first heavy blow of failure had fallen upon the scheme for which they had all been working so hard

and hoping so much for months; he had told them that within three weeks of the departure of the intending colonists the man on whom all the arrangements on the other side of the water depended had betrayed his trust. But there was about him as he spoke such a magnetic atmosphere of strength, and courage, and resolution that the eager faces around him lightened instead of clouding at his words:

"Have you just come from committee?" asked one of the men.

"Only just," was the answer. "I got down here as quickly as possible, knowing that you would probably have heard something, and that you would be anxious for news. We had a long sitting, of course."

"And what is going to be done? The people won't start on the twenty-fifth, of course?"

"That they most certainly must, and shall!" was the emphatic answer. "Any touch of the doubt and hesitancy inseparable from postponement would be fatal to their spirit. As to what is to be done, the only thing that is definitely settled is that Wheeler sails to-morrow by the White Star boat to take up matters over there. Now, can anybody tell me whether any rumour of this business has got about among the people themselves? I hope not."

There was a moment's pause, and the restless young man looked guilty.

"I'm afraid," he began apologetically, "I'm almost afraid they've picked up something."

Norman glanced at him and reflected for a moment.

"It can't be helped," he said rapidly and decidedly. "We must do the best we can."

Then, as steps were heard approaching the still open door, he turned towards it with the quickness of a man whose faculties are all on the alert.

Aubrey Chisholm was coming into the room followed by Reynolds, and with a nod of greeting only to the former, Norman said cheerily :

" Hullo, Reynolds ! Looking for me ? "

Reynolds, who had stopped short on the threshold, hesitated and glanced at the group by which Norman was surrounded, not exactly with embarrassment, but with the reserve common to most superior men of his class where another class is concerned Norman, observing his hesitation, moved quickly towards him as Aubrey's eager questions were answered by one of the other men, and then Reynolds said in a gruffly confidential tone of voice :

"I heard as you was seen to come in 'ere, sir, and I come in, wanting a word with you particular. This 'ere about this 'ere Mr. Elton, sir. Is it true, if I may make so bold?"

"Quite true," returned Norman instantly, meeting the man's shrewd eyes with his own very bright and steady.

"Then I've got a message for you, sir, an' it's this 'ere. There's half-a-dozen of us as is going would take it kind if we could have a word with you anywheres as you like to name to us at seven o'clock to-night, if that time 'ud be convenient. There's one or two of 'em as is in work and can't get away not before."

"Seven o'clock to-night?" answered Norman, as cheerily as though such a request were an everyday occurrence. "All right, Reynolds. I shall be very glad to see

as many of you as like to come at the Long Street office at seven."

"Thank you, sir," was the brief answer. And as Reynolds left the room, Norman turned once more to the group in the middle of the room, whose eager talk had made a background to the short dialogue by the door, with an additional light in his eyes and an additional elasticity in his step. With every difficulty that met him his capacity for grappling with it seemed to increase.

Only twenty-four hours had passed since, in the midst of all his happiness and excitement, he had been pulled up short and forced to face the bitter alternatives presented to him by Dr. Custance. He had kept his appointment at Gloucester Terrace that same evening; he had moved and spoken like a man in a dream with no moment's forgetfulness of the decision awaiting him. The

blow had been so utterly unexpected, and it had been so skilfully planted; the revelation of baseness in Dr. Custance had been so astounding to him; that his mental faculties and his judgement alike were temporarily overwhelmed by it. He could not reason, he could hardly think; the more he struggled for some lucid conception of the whole situation, the more he struggled to see clearly not only the right course but any course whatever before him, the more confused he grew. He had listened to Stella's music as she played to him that evening; he had answered her anxious questions as to his tired, haggard face; like a man under the influence of some sort of terrible nightmare. He had gone home still overshadowed by this confused weight of trouble, and he had sunk into a heavy, dreamless sleep with it still upon his mind.

He had awaked the next morning with that curious reaction of feeling which not uncommonly follows on heavy mental perplexity, and which is peculiarly characteristic of such a temperament as Norman's. His trouble had become to him all unreal, all some mistake which could be set right immediately when he should once get his faculties clearly and collectedly to face it. And then, just as he had determined that his first task that morning should be to think it all out and find or make a way to a decision, the current of his thoughts was suddenly turned; his every faculty was claimed to face an emergency that met him with his letters at the breakfast-table. It was an emergency which surrounded the Essendine scheme with difficulty and danger so pressing and so formidable, that Dr. Custance's threats and he intangible danger to the scheme involved

in them were for the moment swept from his mind.

Information reached him as secretary of the committee that Richard Elton, the manager to whom affairs in Canada had been entrusted, and on whom the ultimate success of the scheme practically depended, had absconded with all the money hitherto entrusted to him.

It was a crisis, and all Norman's spirit rose instantly to meet it. That it was through a friend of his own that Richard Elton had been introduced to the committee; that he himself was consequently indirectly responsible for his nominee; was a personal consideration hardly felt by him in his intense absorption in the interests of the endangered scheme. The other members of the committee, prepared for crushed humiliation, possibly even proffered

resignation on his part, were electrified almost out of their agitation by his appearance among them full of fire and resolution, and taking it for granted that they had all been alike deceived and that they were all alike intent on neutralising the effects of the deception practised on them. At that committee meeting—hastily convened to consider the emergency—his energy had carried all before it. It was his resolute opposition that had prevented, after a long fight, that postponement of the departure of the colonists, which to every one else concerned seemed under the circumstances a matter of course. It was his keen sense and prompt judgement that had achieved the immediate despatch of a substitute for the defaulting manager. And now as he stood in the long room of the warehouse answering the hundred and one questions

put to him by his anxious and excited helpers, generating confidence and hopefulness in the most anxious and despairing, his interview of the day before with Dr. Custance and all that it involved had faded so completely into the background of his mind, in the stress and ardour of action, that it was for the time being practically forgotten.

"I must be off," he said at last. "There's a good deal to do." He laughed as he spoke as though it were mere child's play, after all, that there should be every prospect of his spending the greater part of the night with Richard Elton's substitute in the office in Long Street. "Good night," he added cheerily as he shook hands with the three ladies and nodded to the men. "By-the-bye, the cooking class goes on finely, I hear, Mrs. James! Come along, Aubrey."

"You're coming to dinner at Gloucester Terrace, aren't you, Norman?" said Aubrey eagerly, as they left the room together.

"No, I can't," returned Norman, at once brightly and ruefully. "That's exactly what I wanted to tell you, Aubrey, old boy. There's something wrong among the men, and they've asked me, through Reynolds, to meet a deputation at seven o'clock to-night. It's something to do with this Elton business, of course. I hoped they wouldn't have got wind of it, but young Clayton let it out, evidently. It must be settled up at once, of course, and I could make no difficulty about meeting them."

"Stella will be disappointed," answered Aubrey.

"I know," said Norman quickly. "She hasn't heard anything yet either, for she's not been down here to-day. I meant to

have told her myself this evening. You must tell her all about it, Aubrey, and tell her why I can't come to dinner. She'll understand. And I shall come for an hour directly I've settled with the men."

"But you've got to meet Wheeler."

"That's not until ten o'clock. He wanted the evening to make his own arrangements. I shall have time between," and with a nod and a gesture of farewell, Norman disappeared into the Long Street office.

CHAPTER VII.

An hour later Norman was still alone in the office, sitting at the writing-table absorbed in thought. Sundry books and papers, relating to the affairs of the scheme, with which he had been preparing for his interview with Richard Elton's substitute, were strewn about the table, but his actual work with them had been some time ago disposed of, and now he was thinking over all that they suggested to him; thinking it over with keen, bright eyes and that curiously intent, receptive look which generally implies a new idea of some kind—an idea at once attractive and doubtful in its

unfamiliarity. He was evidently oblivious of Dr. Custance and his threats.

It was just seven o'clock when he turned his head suddenly, looked at the clock on the mantelpiece, and then began to put away such books and papers as he would not need again that night, arranging the others ready to hand. He had hardly finished when he heard the tramp of heavy feet in the passage outside, and with a clumsy knock the door opened.

There were about half-a-dozen men clustering together in the narrow passage, and at their head was Reynolds. It was he who on Norman's cordial words of reception advanced first into the room, followed by the others. They were all in their working clothes, and upon every one of them the heavy hand of grinding poverty had set its mark in one form or another;

they looked rough enough in every instance, but there was none of that leaden hopelessness, so often characteristic of the lowest class of working man, in any one of their faces. Originally shrewd and capable, they were taking their lives into their own hands at Norman's instigation; and their self-respect and their courage were developing day by day with the effort and the sense of responsibility involved. As they stood awkwardly together, fumbling their caps, and waiting for their spokesman to begin, Norman saw that they were the six most reliable and intelligent of the intending colonists, and his spirit rose instinctively to meet the difficulty he foresaw in dealing with them.

"You come as a deputation, I take it?" he said pleasantly, addressing himself to Reynolds.

But as though each man was conscious of an individual interest in the question, each man answered it in more or less gruff tones according to the form of words that seemed good to him; and the result was a confused and hoarse murmur of assent, from which Reynolds's voice finally separated itself as he went on:

"What we've a-come to say, sir, we want you to understand first and foremost, hasn't come into our 'eads to-day for the first time, not by a long way. It's been said here and there, between one and two, times and again, and said hearty. It ain't no sudden thing, sir, and we ain't a-speakin' 'asty."

"I understand," said Norman, as Reynolds paused. "Yes?"

"You and the other gentlemen found this 'ere Mr. Elton to manage for us over

on the other side, and we was all prepared to say well and good to anything as seemed well and good to you, sir, and it weren't for us to say nothin'. But now as he ain't no go, and maybe you don't just know for the moment where to lay your hand on any one as you could be sure of, we make so bold as to come and ask you a favour."

"Yes?" repeated Norman interrogatively. He was puzzled.

Reynolds suddenly dropped the careful and even oratorical style in which he had been speaking, evidently on lines laid down beforehand, and drew a step nearer to Norman. A rough, sympathetic movement ran through the group of men behind him as he did so.

"Mr. Strange, sir," he began earnestly, and the face of every man behind him changed and settled into the same earnest-

ness, as though each man felt himself the speaker, "it's this way: It seems a deal for a lot of rough chaps like us to come and ask of a gentleman like you, but look what you've done for us, sir! You've treated us like men, and you've made men of us. You've showed us a sight o' things as no one else wouldn't a' showed us, and you're putting us in the way to make a fresh start with what you've learned us. It's you as 'as done it, sir; it's you as we all look to. It ain't as we don't understand what a fresh start means, but there's them among us as see our way to being better chaps here at home, bad as things is for us here, with you to keep us going straight, than away over in America without you. And what we wants to say, sir, is—come with us!"

A sudden light leapt into Norman's eyes; a light in which the comprehension that

had come to him at last was lost in triumph. The idea at which he had been looking as he waited for the deputation had been put into shape in Reynolds's three last words, and it suddenly sprang into life, a full-grown resolution.

"Come with you!" he repeated, speaking slowly, but with a ring in his voice that told of intense excitement firmly suppressed. "Come out with you and settle you in, you mean?"

"That's it, sir," interposed a great rough costermonger, pushing up from the background before Reynolds could reply. "O' course, we know as how a gentleman like you 'as a many things to do and to take his pleasure in, but—but——" The man's command of language was not equal to the tax upon it, and he floundered helplessly, until at last he blurted out: "Well, then, we believe you cares!"

The light that had risen in Norman's eyes was glowing now over all his face, and his emotion was no longer to be suppressed.

"I do care!" he cried, stretching out his hand on a sudden irresistible impulse to the man who had spoken. "You're right there, Coulson! Look here, men, all of you!" And he faced them all with a spirited, comprehensive gesture. "This isn't a new thought to me any more than it is to you. I've thought of it again and again, but it has always seemed to me that any man of the right sort would do as well for you as I could do when you're once started, and that my work lay at home. But now that we've had one failure we won't risk another. I'll go out with you myself on the twenty-fifth, and I'll stay with you for a year, at any rate. More than that I can't promise. It may come with time, but I can't promise more

now; but for so much I pledge you my word."

The men had listened to him, after the one involuntary wave of movement that passed through the group on his first vehement words, in a breathless stillness which was almost terrible in the intensity of suspense to which it witnessed. He finished, and there was an instant's dead silence; then quite suddenly the costermonger broke into a wild, hoarse cheer, and on the instant—all individual impulses of expression swept away in the overwhelming tide of intense excitement—every man was cheering, shouting, and cheering again in a very frenzy of delight. As long as he lived Norman never forgot that moment or the moments by which it was succeeded; the gratitude, the wild excitement which, having once got free, was hardly to be restrained again; the rough

eloquence or the speechless strength of feeling with which man after man pressed up to him, begging to shake hands again and again. Such moments can come to a man only once or twice in his life. To the majority they never come at all.

It was over at last. The men, the first rush of their excitement having spent itself, dispersed to tell their news; and Norman walked rapidly away westward, his breath still coming thick and fast, his eyes shining, his face flushed. There was no subsidence of his excitement. With every moment that brought him nearer to Stella and sympathy, as he was whirled through the streets in a hansom, it increased, on the contrary, until his emotions were a very tumult.

The servant who opened the door said something to him, but he hardly heard her,

and the next moment Stella herself came swiftly down the stairs towards him.

"You are to come into the dining-room and have some supper before you go upstairs," she said, in a manner that was half peremptory, half shy. "Aubrey says he believes you've had nothing to eat to-day." She opened the dining-room door as she spoke, and then, turning her head to him over her shoulder as he followed her, the servant having by this time left them, she saw the unusual light and glow in his face. "Oh, what has happened?" she cried involuntarily, her own face kindling as she spoke from sheer sympathy.

He shut the door quickly, and turned towards her with a movement that was indescribably excited.

"The men have asked me to go with them!" he said.

"To go with them! To live among them!"

The girlish voice rang with a thrill that was the echo of his own, and the colour rushed in a quick, crimson flood to Stella's cheeks. Few as his words had been, something in his tone and manner, the magnetic influence of his emotion, had put her into instantaneous touch with him, had stirred the fire of enthusiasm in her into a hot, responsive glow. She understood instinctively all that those few words meant, and she stretched out her hands to him as she spoke with an impulsive movement of irrepressible congratulation.

Norman caught the outstretched hands in his and drew her to him.

"As to living among them, that is for the future to decide, the future and—you, my darling. But I have given them my

word to go out with them on the twenty-fifth, and to stay with them for a year. Stella, you will wait for me, I know. You care, as I care, for all that this experiment involves. You cared for these poor fellows when I knew nothing of them; you taught me how to help them. Ah! when one sees what the little one has done is to them, there is no other work in the world that seems worth doing!"

"There isn't any other work worth doing!" cried Stella vehemently, her eyes shining, her flushed face beautiful with excitement. "None, none, none in the world. I taught you? I taught you nothing, dear, for I knew nothing until I saw you work. I was sorry—who could see those pitiful, pitiful lives and not be sorry? But I didn't understand; I didn't see what helping them really meant—all that was in it—until you

came. Ah! Norman, Norman, let me help you. Don't leave me behind. The women want help as much as the men, and I've longed—oh! I can't tell you how I've longed —to go with them. They'll be so homesick, some of them, poor souls. It's all so strange and terrible to them, and how can they encourage one another when they're all alike wretched and anxious? They're so helpless, too, and so despondent. Oh, Norman, take me with you, take me with you!"

"Take you with me?" cried Norman, catching her suddenly in his arms and looking into the pleading face. "You don't mean that, Stella? It isn't possible, is it? I oughtn't to let you——"

"Why not?" interrupted Stella, crimson now to the roots of her hair, but not a whit less vehement. "Shall we get tired of each

other, do you think, that you're afraid to marry me in such a hurry? No! no! don't!" as the inevitable result of her words declared itself. "Listen to me. What is against it? There is work that I can do there—work that nobody else can do—and there's nothing I could do while you're gone that any one else couldn't do as well. I'm not afraid to rough it, Norman, and if you know anything about me really, you shouldn't be afraid of it for me; and it's only for a year—at first, at any rate. Norman, if you don't take me, I'll—I'll marry some one else while you're gone."

She was half laughing, half crying; intensely, passionately in earnest; and Norman—himself in a whirl of excitement—was completely carried away by her. Caution and consideration are not invariable attendants on human decision, and fortunately

impulse is sometimes a better thing. Norman's impulse carried the day now.

"Take you?" he cried; "Stella, my darling!" Words of consent and gratitude were as nothing, and he took her suddenly into his arms, and answered her without them.

Mrs. Alison looked back upon that evening for the remainder of her life as upon quite the most agitating and bewildering period of time through which it had ever been her misfortune to pass. To have Stella rushing suddenly into the drawing-room and announcing that she was going to America with Mr. Strange in three weeks; to have Mr. Strange following headlong with a torrent of explanation and apologies; to have Aubrey complicating the situation with vigorous demonstrations of satisfaction and emotion, was too much even for her placidity. Why they were all so excited, and for what

reason Stella was to be married in a fortnight, she had no idea. She found that she had given her consent to something—she hardly knew to what. And her whole appreciation of the position was summed up in her helpless reply to a scathing remonstrance addressed her a little later by her brother: "I couldn't help it."

The work to be done that night with Richard Elton's substitute was considerably simplified by Norman's preliminary announcement to the astonished and much excited Mr. Wheeler, that he himself, with his wife, would arrive on the spot with the colonists. It was hardly one o'clock when Norman finally let himself into his rooms, his work over for the day.

It was not surprising that with such a day's work behind him, with his immediate future revolutionised, and his brain in a

tumult, he was by no means inclined to go to bed. He flung himself into a chair and lit a cigar. But rest was impossible to him, and in a minute or two the cigar went into the fireplace, and he began to walk up and down the room.

Suddenly he stopped short, and a certain change came over his keen, eager face. Across all his realisations of the present, all his hopes for the future; across the confused tangle of thoughts of Stella and schemes for the colony of which his mind was full; there had cut, with that strange inconsequence with which thoughts come and go, a remembrance of Dr. Custance and their interview of only the day before.

"That must be settled, of course," he said to himself. "I'll see Custance to-morrow and make an end of all that."

The thought made way for others and he resumed his walk.

Little more than twenty-four hours before and he had realised to the full his helplessness in Dr. Custance's hands, and all the harm to the scheme that Dr. Custance had it in his power to work. He had even overestimated the peril of the position. Now it seemed to him that he had only to speak and the whole affair would melt into thin air. Events had moved with a rush with him in the interval, and the impression made on him at the time by the interview had been obliterated. The whole thing, looked back upon through the haze with which intervening emotion had surrounded it, was almost too preposterous to be taken seriously; and it seemed to him practically disposed of already by sheer force of its inherent impossibility. A short interview with Dr. Custance on the following morning seemed to him all that was necessary.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Mrs. Perkins quite surpassed herself this morning! Her comments are too comic!"

Mrs. James, the pleasant little woman who had made one of the expectant group in the warehouse on the previous day, finished her speech with a merry laugh, and Mrs. Custance, to whom it had been addressed, looked at her in rather helpless silence. Chit-chat with the other workers in St. Fabian's was always a painful embarrassment to her; and she never by any chance saw a comic side to the ignorant misery of the people about her.

Mrs. James's cooking class had just

dispersed, and Mrs. Custance, having some trivial question to ask her with regard to one of the emigrating families, had come into the class-room to speak to her. Mrs. James herself, and the girl who helped her with the class, were busily engaged in washing and putting away their utensils as they talked; and Mrs. Custance stood on the other side of the long table, hesitating nervously. Her question was asked and answered, but Mrs. James had always plenty to say and liked to say it, and she and her assistant were vying with one another as to who should repeat the funniest story of the class—all in the most perfect good nature—when the girl broke off suddenly and exclaimed:

"Why, here's Miss Chisholm! Oh, I'm so glad! I want to congratulate her."

The door at the other end of the room had opened and Stella was coming towards

them smiling and nodding. The news of her engagement to Norman Strange had spread as quickly as such things do, since Norman, in the ardour of his joy, had told every one who could be considered likely to take the faintest interest. It so happened that neither Mrs. James nor the girl with her had seen Stella since hearing of it, and before she could speak to them they received her with the demonstrations natural under the circumstances.

"Many congratulations, Miss Chisholm," cried the girl, shaking hands heartily as she spoke. And then Mrs. James, who was a demonstrative little woman, and very fond of Stella, kissed her warmly, saying:

"My dear, I'm so glad. He's the nicest man I know!"

"Congratulations!" echoed Stella, laughing and blushing, and looking from one

to the other. "Why, you can't have heard already."

"We heard the day before yesterday," answered Mrs. James, laughing. "Mr. Strange told me himself."

"The day before yesterday," repeated Stella, blushing a still deeper pink. "Oh, it's our engagement you mean! I feel as if that must be years and years old, so much has happened since."

She shook hands with Mrs. Custance as she spoke, laughing gaily. It was the first time they had met since their conversation over the packing of the books, but Stella was quite unconscious of the fact. If her engagement seemed to her so old a story, that scene with Mrs. Custance had receded so far into the past as to be hardly remembered. It would have needed a distinct effort on her part to convince

her that she and Norman had not always been to one another what they were to-day.

"I've come to ask you a favour," continued Stella, turning quickly back to Mrs. James, and quite unaware that she had given Mrs. Custance no time to speak to her.

"What is it?" said Mrs. James, with that benign smile which invariably greets petitions from a newly engaged girl. "And what has happened since?"

On the table, close to Mrs. Custance, as she stood a little apart from the other three, the dishes and basins already washed lay waiting to be dried. There was a cloth near them, and with a tacit effacing of herself from the conversation, which was absolutely simple in its innate humility, Mrs. Custance took it up and began the

work deserted by Mrs. James and her assistant in their interest in Stella.

"Norman—Mr. Strange—is going out with the colonists on the twenty-fifth," began Stella. "He is going to stay for a year at least, and I'm going too."

"My dear!" exclaimed Mrs. James; and "Oh, how splendid!" broke from the girl. Stella's third auditor said nothing. Her face had turned a shade paler, perhaps, on Stella's first words, but she had gone on with her work as though she had no part in the news told, and she only looked up from it quietly at Stella for a moment, as the latter finished speaking.

"It's all very sudden, isn't it?" said Mrs. James, as soon as astonishment would let her speak. "I didn't know there was any idea of Mr. Strange's going."

"There was not, until yesterday," re-

sponded Stella. "The men sent a deputation to ask him. Yes, it is sudden, and the time is rather short, and that is where my favour comes in, Mrs. James."

She had come to ask Mrs. James to take off her hands such portions of her work in St. Fabian's as were not immediately connected with the colonists themselves, and her petition was granted with alacrity.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" concluded Mrs. James earnestly. "Do tell me!"

"Nothing really, thanks," answered Stella with bright gratitude. "I want to do as much as possible for the people; it will make it easier to help them afterwards, you see. But it is very kind of you."

"Not a bit," returned Mrs. James. "Well, you have excited us! It will be

simply the making of the whole affair. It is splendid of you both, my dear, and it makes it all infinitely more interesting, doesn't it, Mrs. Custance? Why, Kitty," she added, as she became suddenly aware of Mrs. Custance's occupation, "we've actually let Mrs. Custance finish all our washing up. How disgraceful! I had forgotten all about it."

"I—I think it's all done now," said Mrs. Custance nervously.

"I'm very grateful," laughed Mrs. James. "I have to be at home to lunch, and I ought to go at once. You dispose of your domestic arrangements before you come out in the morning, don't you, Mrs. Custance? I find I have to leave some to the middle of the day when I come down here in the morning. Good-bye for the present, Miss Chisholm. Remember, if there is anything that I can

do to help you, I shall be only too delighted."

"And so shall I," said the girl called Kitty, as she, too, shook hands warmly and followed Mrs. James down the room.

The door closed behind them, and as she and Mrs. Custance were left alone together, Stella, who wanted a book from the class-room library, went up to the shelves with an excited little laugh.

"Nobody can help me much, I'm afraid," she said. "It's all work I must see to myself. It's very kind of them, though."

"You will be very busy," said Mrs. Custance diffidently. She was standing by the table, evidently uncertain whether she should go or stay. She did not offer her own services to Stella, but her eyes were rather wistful as they rested on the active figure busy with the books.

"Yes," assented Stella energetically. "I want to take out a good many things that will be useful to the people when we begin to get settled down a little; Mr. Strange and I have talked over several plans. Oh, I only hope I shall be able to be as much to the women as he is to the men. I only wish I were better and cleverer and more like him. There's nobody like him though, that's one thing."

"Yes," responded Mrs. Custance rather vaguely, as Stella paused. For Mrs. Custance, only two days—not half a lifetime of emotion and excitement as in Stella's case—intervened between the present moment and her last conversation with the girl before her, and possibly she found the difference between the Stella Chisholm of then and the Stella Chisholm of now rather confusing. Stella, however, went on expansively:

"It is so exactly the right thing that we should go out with them, that it seems quite silly that it should never have been thought of before. I——" she broke off suddenly with a low cry of happy surprise. "Ah, Norman!"

Norman Strange, who had opened the door and looked into the room, shut it with an eager exclamation and came rapidly up to her.

"I had no idea you were here," he said, looking into her eyes, as they met his, with that indescribable communion which seems in the close bond to which it witnesses to raise a subtle barrier round the two between whom it passes. Then, as though passing out into the world again, he turned and shook hands with Mrs. Custance.

"I thought I should catch Mrs. James," he said. "I wanted to speak to her."

"She's just gone," said Stella, and Norman turned to her again involuntarily as she spoke. "What a pity! Norman, she is going to take the children for me; she was so kind about it. So I can keep on with the big girls quite well."

"I promised to ask you to go and see Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Ford," he answered. "I told them that you are going, and words failed them altogether. They said nothing at last but 'Won't Miss Stella come, and then we can tell her.' Have you time to go?"

"I will make time, of course," she said. "I'm so glad."

"The committee meets at two o'clock," said Norman. "I wonder what it will have to say on the subject? Isn't it a capital plan altogether, Mrs. Custance?" he added, looking towards her with a courteous effort to include

her in the conversation, which emphasized as no neglect could have done the fact that she was and must inevitably continue to be entirely outside it. But Mrs. Custance did not seem to resent the position in the least. She had stood by, while they talked, quiet and insignificant, and with the nervous distress usually latent in her face far less perceptible than usual. She even smiled—at least the slight movement of her lips should have been a smile had they not been so entirely unused to the exercise—as she answered :

"Yes."

The monosyllable was uttered simply and unhesitatingly, and it was a monosyllable only evidently because Mrs. Custance was innately incapable of expressing herself. Nevertheless it was not calculated to promote general conversation, and it was

followed by a pause. Then Mrs. Custance held out her hand to Stella.

"I must go," she said simply. "Good-bye, Miss Chisholm." She shook hands with Norman, and he followed her down the room and opened the door for her, his natural courtesy quickened by his keen appreciation of the good sense of her departure. She was just passing out when he said suddenly and with a certain indescribable change of tone and manner:

"By-the-bye, Mrs. Custance, can you tell me whether I should be likely to find your husband at home at about five o'clock this afternoon?"

Mrs. Custance paused to answer him.

"My husband?" she said. "Yes, I know he will be at home."

"Thanks," answered Norman.

CHAPTER IX.

The committee meeting was over. Norman's announcement had made an immense sensation and had been received with acclamation; he had been congratulated and lauded as a benefactor to his kind; he had become in quite a new sense the centre figure of all the excitement, and the excitement itself was at the same time immeasurably increased. It was not wonderful that when he finally left the committee-room he was all aglow with triumph and elation, and eager, hopeful, confident as he had never, perhaps, been before.

He had determined earlier in the day

to go straight to Dr. Custance's after the committee meeting; and acting instinctively on this decision he turned his quick steps immediately in the direction of Bloomsbury. His attitude of mind towards Dr. Custance and his threats had shifted somewhat, with no conscious thought on his part, since the previous night; and his main idea on the subject now was intolerance of a moment's unnecessary delay in disposing of the whole affair. It was still to him only a question of a few brief, decisive words; borne along as he was on a high tide of success and popularity, doubts were not likely to present themselves. But the very thought of its existence in its present stage had become an insult and an offence to him hardly to be endured.

His mind was busy with plans for the future as he walked swiftly through the

streets; plans to which the elation of the moment lent all the glow and colour of anticipated success; plans in which he saw the germs sown in his forthcoming experiment develope on every side. He rang the bell of the furnished house in Bloomsbury, and as he did so his errand came to the foreground in his mind and his expression changed. His voice as he asked for Dr. Custance was stern.

His manner altered again, however, a moment later when he found himself alone in the dining-room with Mrs. Custance. He was aware of a passing consciousness that he would considerably rather not have seen her just then; but there she was, and his voice instinctively softened for her.

"I have just come from committee," he said, involuntarily shunning any allusion to the circumstances of his visit, and wondering

whether the servant would tell her master that he was there. "For the first time, I think, I and the other committee-men are really at one!"

"They are glad that you should go with the people?"

Mrs. Custance had risen with a start as the door opened, and had turned a pair of frightened eyes towards it. But the fright had died suddenly out of her face as Norman appeared; it was very quiet, as was the tone of her voice, as she spoke. She did not sit down again, but her figure lost its nervous self-consciousness.

"They are delighted!" responded Norman, his eyes lighting and his tone kindling at the thought. "And they may be delighted if things turn out as I hope they will! There never was a man with a finer chance than I have! If something tangible in the

way of help for the people doesn't come out of this affair now it will be my fault."

Looking at him as he was at the moment, nobody could have doubted that on those terms something, and something well worth working for, must inevitably come out of the Essendine colonisation scheme. His keen face bore capacity and ardour on every line. The dull blue eyes of the woman opposite him rested on him quietly, and Mrs. Custance did not speak.

"I've everything in my favour," he continued, with a buoyant laugh. "Words can't—ah, Custance, how do you do?"

There was an indescribable change in Norman's voice as he said the last words, and his face had changed no less suddenly and completely as Dr. Custance came into the room. It had grown cold and stern, and it did not soften even when, on Mrs. Cus-

tance's movement to leave them alone, he turned to open the door for her. As though the change in him had been observed by her, she looked up at him for an instant as she passed with vaguely troubled eyes. Then she was gone, and, shutting the door upon her, Norman turned again and confronted her husband, his face grown sterner and colder still. In the actual presence of Dr. Custance the whole affair had become to him at once more real and more monstrous, but not a whit less easily to be settled.

"Dr. Custance," he said, "I am here to have a final explanation with you on the subject of our last interview. Thanks, no, I won't sit down," as Dr. Custance seated himself and signed an invitation to Norman to do the same. "You and I have been acquaintances now for several years; we have been very good friends, and I have

never thought of you as anything but an honourable man. Consequently I am ready to believe that you imagined the charge you brought against me two days ago to be substantiated. This being the case I now give you my word of honour that I had no hand whatever in the ruin of Alice Eade, and that I had from Robert Caton's own lips a confession that he was answerable for her disappearance from Thornsdyke!"

He paused, but Dr. Custance made no remark. He went on again, speaking rather slowly and controlling himself with an effort:

"The course you took when you believed me to be guilty I do not wish to discuss. But I am sorry that under the circumstances I must ask you for your word that, knowing the truth, you will refrain from spreading abroad lies."

Dr. Custance looked at him in silence for

a moment, with a cynical smile just touching the corners of his lips, and then he said drily, still leaning indolently back in his chair:

"You attach altogether greater value to a word than I am prepared to do. I, for instance, do not find myself able to accept as proof of your innocence your own assertion that you are not guilty!"

A sharp exclamation rose to Norman's lips and a white flash of anger passed across his face. But he controlled himself.

"I have given you my word of honour, Dr. Custance!" he said sternly. "Take care what you say!"

"And you want my word of honour in return," answered Dr. Custance, with a hardly perceptible sneer. "It is, as I said in the course of our last interview, purely a question of terms, but these terms do not strike me as being good enough."

"They are the terms common among gentlemen!" answered Norman, his spirit rising, but no uneasiness as to the final result of the interview touching him even yet.

"Doubtless very true!" replied Dr. Custance, with the same slight sneer. "But our relations are rather unusual among gentlemen, and the terms must be stretched accordingly. Several things have occurred, or perhaps I should say, several things have come to my knowledge, since our last interview which alter the situation, as I see it, considerably. I should have called on you to-morrow, if you had not come here to-day, to propose the terms which, under the circumstances, I will propose now."

The potentialities of his position, as Dr. Custance saw them, had, as he said, developed.

"There is no necessity to give yourself

that trouble, Dr. Custance; I absolutely refuse to come to any terms. As surely as you take a single step to spread abroad this monstrous fabrication, so surely you will find yourself prosecuted for libel. I shall rely upon the truth to clear me, and the advantage to you will be absolutely nil."

It was the spirited defiance of confident innocence, but Dr. Custance passed it over as though it had never been uttered.

"You are engaged to be married," he said, "and it is naturally an object to you to keep this story from the young lady. You are going out to Canada with her immediately, practically to govern the colony you are establishing, and if things go well with you there is a fine position waiting for you in the future. You are already very popular and much respected; all these points must be duly considered. My terms consequently

are these: five thousand pounds down before you leave England!"

He paused, and Norman turned on his heel with a short laugh.

"Consider your modest proposal declined, Dr. Custance, and proceed as you please!"

"If you elect to abide by that distinctly premature decision," he returned, speaking very slowly, and with a certain strange incisiveness, "you will find yourself called upon in the course of a day or two to clear yourself of the charge of the murder of Robert Caton."

"What!"

The monosyllable broke from Norman sharp and harsh; and he faced round again suddenly and looked full into the other man's face. Dr. Custance still leant back in his chair, but about the careless repose of his attitude there was a suppressed intent-

ness, a reserve force of relentless determination, inexpressibly menacing. There was a moment's dead silence, and Norman's breath came thick and fast. Then, before he could collect or control himself sufficiently for speech, Dr. Custance said with the same slow incisiveness of tone:

"You find it difficult for the moment to realise the possibility of such a thing. I will try to make it clear to you. Robert Caton met his death suddenly under my roof, on the twenty-first of May, eighteen hundred and eighty; he was found by myself, my wife and servant—high words having previously been heard by all of us to pass between yourself and him—dead on the floor, having evidently fallen heavily. So far you will allow circumstances point with unpleasant distinctness to foul play. You and the dead man were both inmates

of my house—I may remark in passing that the circumstances that led to your residence with me are by no means in your favour—and being naturally anxious to avoid a scandal I called in a brother practitioner, an amiable old gentleman on whose discretion I could rely. He went through a form of post-mortem examination, and certified the death as arising from heart-disease."

"It did arise from heart-disease!" cried Norman hotly. "Good God, man, you told me so yourself!"

"Did I?" returned Dr. Custance. "Are you prepared to prove that fact? Are you prepared to prove that I had any hand whatever in the post-mortem? I think not. I will go on, if you have no objection. At the hour of Robert Caton's death I had been his sole medical adviser for twelve months and more. I am pre-

pared to swear that my knowledge of his physical condition is irreconcilable with the cause of death given on the certificate; that I know his heart to have been in no such condition as is therein described. I overheard the quarrel between you and the dead man; I had it from your own lips that you had struck him; and, again, I am prepared to swear that the blow killed him. This being the case, you will probably inform me that I occupy the awkward position of accessory after the fact. This is undoubtedly so, but there is such a thing, I may remind you, as turning Queen's evidence. At the time when the deed was committed I was entirely unaware of any possible motive existing in your mind for disposing of Robert Caton. As a poor man, dependent on my practice, and on such addition to my income as I

could make by receiving dipsomaniacs, I was, perhaps not unpardonably, anxious to avoid a scandal likely to jeopardise both, and I confess to having allowed the matter to be hushed up. But that I did so has been a heavy weight on my mind from that moment to this. Your evident sense of guilt, your evident anxiety to stop my mouth, and to propitiate me—witness your donation to the Essendine trust—when we met again in London, increased my remorse, and I began to ponder over the motive that must have prompted your deed. That motive has since become clear to me. I now know from the dying words of the girl over whom you quarrelled with Robert Caton, that you were responsible for her ruin. Robert Caton, who had also a fancy for her, was the one man who discovered what you so carefully concealed. He

threatened you with exposure, and you killed him. That a drunken libertine should proceed to murder, particularly if he is disposed to conceal his vice under a cloak of superhuman virtue, is by no means an astounding circumstance."

"You infernal scoundrel!"

The words came from Norman, low, tense, and vibrating, and he drew a step nearer to Dr. Custance, his hands clenched, his eyes blazing with passion. Dr. Custance looked up into his face with an ugly smile.

He had worked out his story with perfect coolness, and with the absolute assurance of faultless calculation. The references to his sense of his own criminality and to his subsequent remorse had been made with just a suggestion of the plausibility with which he would present them to a solicitor, mingled with a covert sneer.

"Now that the whole chain of circumstances is made clear to me," he continued, "based on my own medical knowledge of the primary fact, my conscience will no longer permit me to allow the public to be deceived by you. I can by no means allow this important and admirable colonisation scheme to be finally handed over to the guidance of the hypocrite I know you to be; I can, in short, no longer remain silent—except upon the terms I have mentioned. Whether you would find it perfectly easy to clear yourself from the charge I propose to bring against you I leave you to decide. You may consider the risk hardly worth a thought; you may have no objection to so trifling an interlude in your philanthropic career. I do not myself know how you would propose to defend yourself. Witnesses to your character from Thornsdyke

would hardly help you much; opinion there inclined to fix on you as the responsible party at the time of the girl's disappearance, and you were not popular. For the dying girl's words, I hardly see how you will disprove them."

"Your wife!" interposed Norman fiercely, "your wife is my witness that the girl was delirious!"

"My wife is a witness to the girl's words," was the composed answer. "Her authority would not stand, I think, against the authority of a medical man as to the physical condition in which they were uttered. As to the blow itself," he continued as a long hissing breath parted Norman's white lips, "that, of course, you would hardly attempt to disprove—or the quarrel that preceded it. I am prepared, as I have already told you, to swear to the result."

"I have the other man's word against yours to prove your perjury!" cried Norman. "The man who knows the truth—who signed the certificate!"

"Dr. Harding himself is dead. His professional reputation in the neighbourhood was such that I think you will find some difficulty in finding witnesses to speak to his skill."

Without a sound, but with a face from which every drop of blood seemed to have retreated, leaving it haggard and set, Norman stared back into the glittering, triumphant eyes that watched him as though each mesh of the deadly net in which he was caught was gradually assuming clearer and ever clearer shape before his mental vision. That Dr. Custance could ever succeed in proving upon him a charge of murder, or even of manslaughter, he never for a moment imagined. That he himself would ever be

able to prove his innocence in the face of the overwhelming array of evidence brought against him by the doctor's skilful manipulation of facts, backed by his remorseless perjury, was beyond the possibility of hope. With a desperate clearness of vision he saw all that the impossibility involved. He saw the colonisation scheme doomed at the outset, and in its doom he saw the heavy weight of another failure added to the disabilities which must attend all similar enterprises in the future. He saw his future life as a man with a stain upon his name; with the taint for ever upon him, in the public estimation, of murderer and seducer. And he saw Stella. He saw her faithful to him, believing in him through everything, but divided from him for as long as they should live. She should not share the life he saw before him.

"What do you want?"

How long a space had passed before the words came from him thick and low, with long pauses between them, he had no idea. He hardly realised that he was speaking until he heard the hoarse, unnatural voice so terribly unlike his own.

"I want your written agreement to pay me five thousand pounds down before you leave England."

"I haven't got it," the hoarse voice answered. And then quite suddenly the ghastly stillness of horror gave way to its passionate protest. "Custance," he cried, "for God's sake, consider, consider what you are doing! Have you no principles of honour or humanity to hold you back, to show you that if this means ruin to me it means infinitely worse to you? Think what you are making of yourself;

think what life would be to you lived out on money wrung from me by such a hideous means. Look, if you are hard up, if it is terrible necessity that has brought you to this, let me help you out in some other way. If it's a case of extremity, I'll forget what you were driven to and do my best for you, upon my soul. Tell me the truth."

Dr. Custance smiled.

"I want five thousand pounds from you," he said; "you have your choice between payment and ruin. There is no deeper truth than that."

"But you know—good God, you know—that the whole thing is a lie!"

"I am prepared to swear to its truth. Now, listen to me, if you please," Dr. Custance continued, rising from his chair at last and looking full into Norman's despairing,

incredulous face. "I am not to be put off by any quantity of eloquence, however lofty. I have placed your choice of alternatives before you, and I leave you to decide. The decision is important to you, and I have no intention of hurrying you. For the second time I give you three days' grace. If I have heard nothing from you by the third day from this I shall proceed as I have told you."

Mechanically, without another word or look at him, Norman turned and left the room, his face grey and drawn like the face of an old man.

CHAPTER X.

"GOOD-BYE, Mrs. Custance. A lovely afternoon, isn't it?"

It was five o'clock in the afternoon, and outside the door of the warehouse in Peel Yard three or four of the most constant of the workers in the cause of the Essendine scheme, among whom was Mrs. James, were exchanging the usual last words. Mrs. Custance had lingered over her work and had come out alone some minutes after the others. She was looking even unusually tired, and there was a certain expression of anxiety or distress about her face. She came out hurriedly, and at the same time reluctantly,

as though she wished to stay on but was obliged, not only to go, but to go without further delay. She murmured a response to Mrs. James's cheery words, and with a salutation that comprehended the whole group, she passed hastily through it.

"Who has seen Strange to-day?"

From the opposite direction to that in which she was going, Mr. James had come up to the party round the door just as she moved away from it, and as he spoke, Mrs. Custance, on the outskirts of the group, stopped suddenly. That vague trouble on her face strengthened curiously, and she turned involuntarily, apparently. The question was followed by a moment's pause, and then Mrs. James answered her husband.

"I don't think any one has seen him," she said. "He doesn't seem to have been down here to-day at all. We have wanted

him particularly, but there must have been a long committee meeting, I suppose."

"I do not think there has been a committee meeting at all," observed one of the other ladies. "At least, I heard this morning that the committee would not meet to-day."

"Was he—was Mr. Strange here yesterday?"

The voice was very faltering, very ill-assured, and the effort of asking the question, of drawing general attention on herself, had brought a faint colour into Mrs. Custance's cheeks. Her voice coming as it did from the edge of the group, every one turned towards her, and her fingers tightened round the handle of her shabby umbrella. Again there was a moment's pause before the question was answered, and this time it was one of the men who replied.

"I did not see him, Mrs. Custance," he said

"Neither did we," said Mrs. James.

"I did," said a young man, rather hesitatingly. "Just for a minute. He was down at the office; he—don't you think he is awfully overworked? He looked awfully ill and—well, not like himself somehow!"

The blue eyes on the outskirts of the group were fixed on the speaker's face—the trouble in them growing as though their owner divined by some curious instinct that he could have said more had he chosen. Then they were turned to Mr. James, as the latter said:

"Well, what I want to know is whether he is likely to be here this evening?"

"Here comes Miss Chisholm!" interposed his wife with a smile. "She will be able to tell you, Tom."

Stella was coming up the street towards them with a step that was slower than usual and less elastic, too. Her face had a preoccupied look. It cleared, however, as she came up to the party by the warehouse door, but as Mr. James asked her pleasantly for news of Norman's probable proceedings that evening, the smile died suddenly from her lips again.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you," she said, and those anxious blue eyes—the trouble in them always growing—were fixed upon her now as she spoke. "I believe he will be here, but I have hardly seen him for two days." She paused and smiled a rather forced little smile. "There is such a press of work, you see," she added.

"I hope he is not overdoing it," said Mr. James more seriously, struck by something indefinable in the girl's tone and

manner. She hesitated a little as she answered him.

"I hope not!" she said. "There is so much responsibility, you see. Good night!" she continued rather hurriedly, and nodding to the party in general she walked rapidly away.

Two nights and two days had passed since Norman Strange's interview with Dr. Custance. At that same moment, while his whereabouts and his probable plans for the evening were being discussed, Norman himself sat alone in his own room, his elbows resting on the table, his haggard face supported on his clenched hands; sat as he had sat through many of the long hours of those two long days and nights face to face with despair.

He had come in about three hours before; he had sat down heavily in the nearest chair,

and he had hardly moved since. He had come in after a morning in which the effort to force his brain to work in the ordinary channels under the ceaseless pressure of the problem before him had been almost as unavailing as it was agonising. He had come in hardly conscious of the work he was leaving undone, aware only of an overwhelming necessity for quiet; for quiet that implied neither rest nor peace, but which brought relief only inasmuch as it left him free to think.

There was no new train of thought to be followed out in the hideous circle in which his brain moved round. It was the same thing over and over again; the same questions, the same answers, the same results deduced. Seek as he would he could find no opening, he could catch no ray of light in his darkness. There was no phase

of feeling or of reasoning possible, with respect to the statements made to him and the alternatives placed before him by Dr. Custance, through which he had not passed, not once, but many times during the past two days and during the past two nights with their long sleepless hours. He had worked out the case against him from every possible point of view, and now it had seemed to him preposterous in its futility, now overwhelming in its convincingness. He had worked out again and again the probable results of a trial and a nominal acquittal, and now he had faced the thought with a defiant confidence in the result, now in an agony of despair. He had tried to face the thought of paying the blackmail levied on him. His assertion to Dr. Custance that he had not the sum of money demanded of him was true inasmuch as such a payment

would have left him practically penniless; his capital was nearly all sunk in the Essendine scheme. But though this difficulty might doubtless have been overcome, the thought of living out his life on such terms—holding position, respect, influence, at the good pleasure of such a man as Dr. Custance—was absolutely intolerable to him. Against such a prospect his whole nature rose in protest. Ruin—death itself would be better.

The hours were wearing on slowly, pitilessly; the second day was nearly over, and before the third dawned if any means of escape there were they must be found. And slowly, as the time of respite shortened, there grew upon him a deadly clearness of conviction that means of escape there were none. It was the clearness not of healthy, logical reasoning, but of overstrained brain

and nerves. He had thought it all out alone. If he could have spoken of it with any other human creature it would, in all probability, have presented a different aspect to him. But of such a course he never thought; he had no friend at hand on whose judgement and on whose attachment to himself he could equally rely. Already considerably overworked and over-excited when the blow fell upon him, it was almost inevitable that thirty-six hours of such ceaseless racking thought should work in such a man a morbid appreciation of the hopelessness of his position. With every hour that passed his moods of confidence, of defiance, grew fainter and reasserted themselves at longer intervals. There seemed to him to be only one way of saving himself — that pointed out to him by Dr. Custance—and that he would not take. Life—all that meant life

in its best sense—was practically over for him.

And this was not the worst. It was not his own ruin on which those haggard eyes of his were fixed as he sat there through the April afternoon. That alone he might have faced. It was not even the image of Stella, with all the shattered hopes, and all the heart-break by which that image was surrounded for him now. But his ruin meant ruin to the scheme with which all his best and highest impulses were bound up; it meant ruin not only to the hopes of the men who trusted in him—though that thought was drawing heavy lines about his set white lips—but to every chance of those future developements of helpfulness of which the scheme, as it stood at present, was to him but the germ. Individuals and theories alike would be dragged down by his fall.

By the anguish of this conviction even the pain of his thoughts of Stella was dominated, and the bitterest dregs of his cup of despair were there.

Once before he had stood, as he had stood three days ago, on the threshold of a career, and the door had closed before him as it was closing now. In that first instance his own hand had closed it. He was wondering now with a heavily recurring morbidness of thought whether he had not in reality closed both in closing one ; whether the present was not the inevitable sequence of the past; whether he was not once again face to face with the inexorable law of retribution. He remembered the thoughts brought him by the death of Alice Eade. He had believed then that in the hopelessness of his love he was to recognise the working of that law. It had seemed to pass

him by in that instance. Was it upon him now, sure, immutable, in no wise to be evaded? Absolutely innocent as he was of the crime so cleverly attributed to him, it seemed to his over-excited imagination that the chains in which Dr. Custance held him were originally—indirectly indeed, but undeniably—of his own forging. Out of his past this horrible thing had risen on him, to throw over the present and the future the solemn shadow of those consequences of wrong-doing of which no man can say: "They will meet me here," or "They will meet me there!" Had it not been for that black line in his record, his life and the life of Alice Eade would never have touched; his life and the life of the man who had him now in his power would never have touched. It was his own sense of that black line that had prompted those words on the subject of

his gift to the Essendine trust, now twisted by Dr. Custance into evidence against him. It was the indubitable existence of that black line that would provide the foundation of fact for the fabrication of falsehood to be raised, and give to the whole the stability of truth.

His manhood cried out to him passionately; was there no justice to be observed, no proportion between sin and its punishment? But Norman had gone down into deep waters, and he knew that of that proportion no man may ever judge.

He rose at last, stiffly and heavily, and walked to the window.

"I wonder what will become of me?" he said to himself almost curiously. "I wonder whether it has all been a mistake, a kind of interval, and I am to go to the dogs after all? It seems possible."

He stood a moment longer, and then he prepared mechanically to go out again. The business of the scheme had been his life for months now, and its claim, however vague his consciousness of its action on him, was not to be suspended for any length of time. It was curiously significant of an inconsistency inherent in man's nature that no realisation of the utter futility, under the circumstances, of all the work to which he returned with painful, groping persistence, added its weight to the heavy burden under which he already laboured.

But though he was dimly aware as he went along the streets towards St. Fabian's both of where he was going and what he had to do on his arrival, he could by no means keep his thoughts upon the work before him. His last train of thought as he stood by the window in his room had carried him

back to the time to which the present was assuming the position of a sequel and continuation; the time which had hitherto held for him the bitterest memories of his life—his first weeks at Thornsdyke. With the persistent monotony of mental exhaustion he let himself dwell on the subject, recalling details half forgotten. He remembered with the curious distinctness of such a frame of mind his first arrival; the dreary station at which no one met him; the dreary walk; and the all-pervading mental atmosphere of humiliation and despair in which those half-forgotten memories were steeped rose about him again. He went over every detail of the days that had followed, searching involuntarily for such as had slipped his memory. So thoroughly absorbed was he, so completely transported into the past, that it seemed to him the merest matter of course when he

became aware that a small, insignificant figure was standing before him, and that Mrs. Custance's voice was wishing him good evening.

She had obliged him to stop, though he was hardly conscious of the fact, and the desperate ring which the effort of such self-assertion had brought to her voice contrasted curiously with the trivial, almost incoherent words she spoke. It was a busy, crowded thoroughfare on the outskirts of St. Fabian's, and she had been hurrying along nervously enough a few minutes before, but now she stood before him as oblivious apparently as he, in his heavy absence of mind, of the people who pushed and hustled her as they hurried to and fro. She was looking straight into his face, and the vague trouble in her own eyes had given place at last to a pain that seemed to absorb all her chronic em-

barrassment and leave her absolutely without self-consciousness. Little as Norman knew it, she looked for that brief interval that elapsed before he spoke into the same face as that on which her eyes had rested with such wistful pity during those early weeks at Thornsdyke, of which his mind was full. By some curious process his thoughts of the past half-hour, acting on the haggard despair already written on his face, had obliterated for the moment all the change wrought by the intervening years, and had reproduced on the stronger features of to-day the sullen hopelessness of misery of five years ago. He roused himself to answer her, and as he spoke the ghost of the past vanished.

"You are going home?" he said mechanically.

"Yes," she answered. "I started some time ago, but I—I was detained." If she

had said "I lingered," it would perhaps have been truer, though, indeed, she hardly knew it. She paused a moment, her eyes, all unnoticed by him in their dulness, resting on his white, haggard features and sunken eyes. Then her lips parted suddenly as though to speak.

She did not speak, however. Her face flushed faintly as though at the temerity of her intention, whatever it had been. She waited a moment, the anxiety struggling for expression on her face pitiful to see, if there had been any one with eyes to see it, and then she said:

"Good night."

He did not see the movement of her hand, half hesitating, half eager, and he lifted his hat to her absently as he said mechanically:

"Good night."

CHAPTER XI.

It was half-past six before Mrs. Custance reached home. She passed into the dingy hall just as Norman Strange in the office in Long Street was sitting down to his writing-table with a desperate effort to concentrate his attention on the business before him. Mrs. Custance had been walking rapidly, and her face was whiter than usual with fatigue. To the heavy anxiety with which her mouth was strangely drawn there was added now a certain frightened look in her eyes, and her voice as she asked the girl who opened the door to her whether her master was in was low, and

not quite steady. She was answered in the affirmative, and, hastily taking off her bonnet and cloak, she went straight into the dining-room, where her husband was waiting for her. Her face and manner were alike full of deprecation, but to her evident surprise Dr. Custance took no notice of her entrance. He had an evening paper before him, and its contents were apparently absorbing, for he did not look up until, on the appearance of their dinner a moment later, she told him timidly that it was ready.

"I—I am sorry that it is a little late," she added nervously; but even then, though he replied with the cutting sarcasm which in her innate stupidity she had drawn upon herself, he hardly seemed to realise the facts of the case. The meal was a cross between dinner and supper, the arrangement of which to her husband's satisfaction was one of the

painful problems of Mrs. Custance's life, and the husband and wife sat down to it in silence.

Apparently painful experience had made silence infinitely preferable to speech in Mrs. Custance's eyes, for she started apprehensively when, about half an hour later, her husband spoke to her for the first time.

"Have you seen Strange to-day?" he asked.

The meal was practically over, and the servant had left the room. Dr. Custance was peeling an apple as he spoke, and watching the process with a certain indolent intentness which had no connection whatever with the skilful movements of his knife. The question was the half idle outcome of the thoughts with which his mind was occupied, and he did not notice and promptly visit with sarcasm as he would otherwise

have done the moment's pause that preceded his wife's answer.

"Yes," she said, "for a minute."

"He didn't send me any message?"

"No." Her voice was rather curious. In it, as in her face, timidity and desperate anxiety seemed to be struggling for the mastery. There was a moment's silence, and Dr. Custance smiled down at his apple a slow, cruel smile. Then, with her two hands gripping one another painfully as they lay in her lap, she went on: "Did—did you expect a message?"

"It was just possible that there might have been one," returned Dr. Custance, with the same indolent contemplativeness.

"Mr. Strange was here for a long time when he came the other day?" Her eyes, as she spoke, were fixed full on her husband's face; they were a little dilated, as though

the sarcastic reproof she expected would be as painful to her as a physical blow might have been; but there was something in her face, and in her voice as well, that was stronger than the fear they held.

Dr. Custance lifted his eyes and looked at his wife thoughtfully. His relations with Norman Strange and the possibilities involved had occupied his mind to the exclusion of any other thought, since first the news of Norman's approaching marriage and departure for Canada had suggested to him to play for a heavy stake on the bold lines he had adopted at their last interview. Previous to that interview he had laid his plans with the cool skill and calculation of an utterly unprincipled man; he had tested his weapons, he had pointed those that needed pointing, and he had dealt his blows when the time came with unerring certainty

of effect. Now, with every hour that shortened the interval allowed by him to his victim for consideration, his assurance as to the result of that consideration strengthened. "He'll pay," he told himself, "he'll pay. There's no choice for him, confound him!"

The insolence of his triumph was accentuated by personal feeling against the man who was at his mercy. Scores had been accumulating in his mind against Norman throughout the past winter; scores embittered by the thought of the wealth he coveted and could find no way to obtain; and now that his hour had come, it brought with it all the sweetness of gratified malice. To a man who sees himself on the verge of a triumph, who anticipates the humiliation of a man he hates, there is certain to come sooner or later a desire to forestall the satisfaction before him by talking about it.

It was not Dr. Custance's habit to deny himself any self-indulgence. His wife was the merest cypher in his eyes, and at the present moment she could combine the advantages of a human listener with the harmlessness of a wax figure. A man rarely acknowledges what is in its first principles a garrulous instinct. Dr. Custance veiled his desire for expression now by telling himself that it was just as well his wife should know as much as she was likely to take in of the business without further delay. If Norman Strange should by any chance refuse to pay for silence, she was his chief witness. There was one point in particular on which it would be necessary to jog her memory, and Dr. Custance told himself, with a cynical sneer, that it would probably take her a long time to readjust matters in her mind.

He looked at his wife for a moment in

silence, not with any idea of studying the expression of her face—which, indeed, in his eyes, was always equally expressionless—but simply pausing as he yielded to his desire. Then he poured himself out a glass of claret, and answered her:

"Yes," he began slowly, "he was here a long time; we were talking about—old times."

He paused before the two final words, and they came out with an indescribable, mocking sneer. Having uttered them, he paused again, as though inviting comment. His wife's face had changed slightly at the sneer; some of the personal timidity seemed to subside as if displaced by another feeling, and her low voice was strangely free from any tone of tentativeness as she said, as if involuntarily:

"Yes."

Dr. Custance changed his position; he leant back in his chair, crossed his legs, and lifted his glass of claret to the light.

"Did he seem in good spirits when you saw him to-day?" he said. "I should imagine not!"

There was no answer. His wife was looking at him now, fixedly, as she had not ventured to look at him for years—as she would not have ventured to look at him now had she been conscious of herself at all—and the struggling anxiety on her face had given way to as struggling an intensity of questioning.

"It was a very awkward thing for him," continued Dr. Custance, adapting the form which his garrulity should take to that necessity of preparing his witness; "it was a very awkward thing for him that girl turning up as she did."

He paused, and carried his glass to his lips, and his wife stirred slightly, as though made restless by some kind of mental tension.

"It was particularly awkward," said Dr. Custance, setting his glass down again, "that he should put in an appearance at her death-bed just at the wrong moment for himself. I'm bound to say that until then—though, of course, I knew that it was Strange's blow, and no such thing as heart-disease, that killed Robert Caton—I believed it was an accident."

He had chosen his words carefully, as being calculated to present the matter to her from the point of view in which he intended her to regard it, and he had counted upon startling her. He paused, expecting some kind of horrified exclamation. None came, and he glanced at his wife.

"What a fool she is!" he said to himself.

Mrs. Custance was sitting with her hands clasped in her lap looking down at them. Her face was absolutely stupid in its total absence of any sort or kind of expression. Anxiety, timidity, questioning, had alike disappeared beneath what might have been a mask of passivity; as all restlessness, all movement, all sign of life, indeed, had disappeared beneath the perfect stillness of her small, spare figure. Dr. Custance began again, less careful of either words or tone, in the presence of what seemed to him stupidity pure and simple.

"In such a case as that," he said, "motive is everything, of course. Once prove a motive, and your accident may become a murder before you know where

you are. Alice Eade's words, taken in conjunction with other little circumstances, prove motive enough and to spare in this case. Strange had ruined her; Caton had discovered it, and swore to expose him; Strange, drunk at the time, and set upon secrecy, disposed of the man who threatened it. Why, it's pretty nearly enough to hang a man."

In the gratification of putting into words the chain of evidence on which he had dwelt incessantly, and with always growing satisfaction, for the last two days, all thought of his insignificant listener passed from Dr. Custance, and his voice was full of insolent triumph. He did not even glance at his wife again, and her face would have told him nothing if he had. It was absolutely colourless and absolutely still. Once started, he gave himself up to the impulse of the

moment, and went on freely, talking solely for the pleasure of talking.

"I don't want to hang him, though," he said. "It wouldn't pay me, fortunately for him! I want five thousand pounds from him, and nobody shall be any the wiser than they are now. Five thousand pounds! It's a nice little capital. He said he hadn't got it. Likely enough! He's been throwing it about pretty freely this winter, confound him! He must find it somewhere, then, that's all."

"If not?"

The two words came from his wife in a strange, low tone. They sounded as though her mouth were dry and the muscles of her face stiff. But Dr. Custance noticed nothing unusual.

"If not," he echoed, with a harsh laugh; "if not, Mr. Norman Strange may say good-

bye to his life, practically; for I'll get him penal servitude as sure as he's alive! If he does me out of the money he shall pay for it that way, I swear! By Jove! I should like it almost as well as the income!"

He stopped suddenly, recalled to his usual self by the unusual energy with which, in the excitement of the moment, he had uttered the last words. He turned slowly in his chair, and once more looked across in the fast-failing light of the April evening to where his wife sat, still and rigid, her eyes fixed, apparently, on her clasped hands —hands that were cold like the hands of a dead woman. He returned to his original purpose of preparing his witness.

"Leila," he began deliberately, "you have not forgotten that girl's words when she saw Strange? You thought, I dare say, that she was delirious? That was your

mistake. She was quite conscious. But you have not forgotten her words?"

No answer. The quickly-falling spring twilight grew darker, as though a thin, intangible pall had fallen, and Dr. Custance could only see the outline of his wife's figure as she sat, still immovable.

"Leila!" His tone was peremptory, and for answer the bent head opposite him was slightly shaken. "That is as well," he returned, an indescribable menace in his dry tones. "You are an important witness, you know." He paused, and when he went on again he spoke more slowly and his voice was more incisive. It was at this point that the memory of his witness had to be jogged. "You have not forgotten either," he said, "though it is some years ago, the circumstances of the quarrel between Caton and Strange, which ended in Caton's death?

Strange was drunk—you remember that, of course? You remember also the words we heard Caton say to him just before Strange struck the blow: 'Tell me where she is'?"

The figure opposite him rose suddenly to its feet and stretched out two small hands; stretching them out wildly, gropingly, like a creature in some deadly pain or unendurable terror.

"That was Mr. Strange!" panted a thin, strangled voice; "that was Mr. Strange!"

Dr. Custance had risen too, and he laid a sudden, cruel grasp upon those outstretched hands. Another thin, grey pall of dusk had fallen, and he could not see his wife's face, though he had forced her close to him.

"It was Caton," he said in a tone that was like the grip in which he held her hands in its pitiless force. "It was Caton! Caton! Do you understand?"

He felt her quiver, shrink, and shudder under his touch as he spoke. She was shaking from head to foot. His hold upon her tightened cruelly, and his low voice was savage in its relentless insistence, as he repeated once again :

" It was Caton ! "

Then quite suddenly he felt her become quite still and passive in his hands and he released her.

" You do understand ! " he said ; and the quiet of his tone was infinitely worse than its brutality had been. " That's lucky ! "

CHAPTER XII.

A BEDROOM of the simplest, most conventional type, and ugly, shabby, bare. Facing the fireplace stood an iron bedstead, its eider-down quilt, though faded, presenting an appearance sufficiently incongruous with its curiously comfortless surroundings. On either side of the bedstead was a door, the ugly drab paint in some need of renewal; that on the right leading into a dressing-room, that on the left out on to the landing. Against the wall, at right angles with this door, stood a chest of drawers. The wall facing that occupied with the chest of drawers contained two windows, across

which were drawn shabby curtains of a nondescript hue, and between the windows stood an ugly little dressing-table. In each of the windows there was a bedroom chair of painted wood.

The room was absolutely, perfectly neat. Of such scanty and necessary etceteras as were visible each was obviously in its own place. Nothing was astray or left to chance; and in the total absence of any nicknacks about the room, any softening suggestion of prettiness or sentiment, this very neatness helped to emphasize its dreary coldness. It was impossible to associate with all that bare precision any thought of human life with its many-sided stir and stress.

In a hard arm-chair, set stiffly by the side of the fireplace—fireless on this warm spring night—sat Mrs. Custance.

Two hours before, at ten o'clock, she had

mechanically obeyed her husband's contemptuous command that she should go to bed; she had obeyed it, that is to say, as far as going to her room might be construed into obedience. She had shut the bedroom door, she had walked across the room like a woman walking in her sleep, and then she had sat down in the chair nearest her. It was past twelve o'clock now, and she had not moved since.

The gas was burning low—she had not even turned it up on her entrance—and in the dim, uncertain light she was sitting in her most usual attitude, her head drooping a little, her hands lying in her lap. There was no abandonment about her pose, none of that relaxation or tension of muscle which would have harmonised naturally with the expression of her face; it was as though, in the unconscious patience in which her life had passed,

the demonstrations natural to most women had never become familiar to her, and the capacity for such expression had become extinct. And in its contrast with her face, her little, ordinary, composed figure was almost terrible.

For her face was ghastly. It was not passionately convulsed; excepting very slightly about the muscles of her mouth, it was not even drawn; nor did it tremble or quiver in the least. It was quite still—still as her motionless figure, as the cold hands lying in her lap. But it was the face of a woman confronted with misery, helpless and unresisting in the clutch of absolute despair.

"Leila! Why the deuce aren't you in bed?"

She had not heard the opening of the door, and her husband's voice close behind her was her first intimation of his presence.

As though the shock had freed her for an instant from the mufflings in which she was condemned to live, striking through all her incapacities to her very heart, there leapt into her face a sudden passion of expression —horror, loathing, and unutterable dread. No cry, even if she had uttered that which rose to her lips, could have increased the eloquence of her face as she started to her feet. Then, as suddenly as it sprang into life, the flame died away, leaving her face, as she turned it to her husband, greyer and duller than before.

"What in the world have you been doing? Why, the window's open still! Confound it!"

Dr. Custance shivered, strode across the room, shut the window with an angry bang, and turned up the gas sharply.

"Why, you must have been asleep!"

he exclaimed harshly, as the light showed him that his wife had taken no steps towards preparing for bed. "Make haste now, will you? I don't want to be kept awake all night."

Twenty minutes passed—twenty minutes during which Mrs. Custance moved mechanically to and fro in the orderly room, and the silence was only broken by the slight sounds her movements made.

Then she came up to her husband with a medicine glass in her hand, and offered it to him, still in silence. Dr. Custance was a bad sleeper, and for several years now his wife's last duty every night had been to pour out and give to him the sleeping draught to which he had accustomed himself.

He took the glass from her to-night as usual, and then he paused.

"I don't know that I'll take it now," he

said dubiously, considering the question with himself, and by no means with her. "I'll try the effect of taking it later in the night, I think." He reflected a moment longer and then he gave the glass back to his wife. "Put it back in the bottle," he said. "You can get up and give it me when I want it. Is it the new bottle?"

His wife's lips moved, but it was the motion of her head alone that answered him in the affirmative. Her voice had left her apparently, for no sound came.

"Mind you're not half asleep, then, when you measure it by-and-by," returned her husband harshly. "I've increased the strength again, and it isn't stuff to fool with. Be careful, do you hear?"

She bent her head again, and was crossing the room to replace the medicine in the bottle when her husband, his mind revert-

ing naturally to the subject uppermost in it, laughed sardonically.

"By Jove!" he said. "Strange would thank you to give me a double dose of that stuff. It would get him out of his little difficulties!"

Mrs. Custance had poured the medicine into the bottle and corked it with mechanical precision. As mechanically she turned down the gas.

Half an hour later the room was very still. Dr. Custance had apparently done well to dispense with his sleeping draught, for he had fallen asleep at once, his head turned slightly on the pillow, and the only sound that broke the silence was the low, regular sound of his even breathing. The light thrown by the turned-down gas was very dim, and over all the dull, precise detail of the room were thrown strange

shadows, merging the whole into a sordid uncertainty. Staring straight out into the shadows, from a face as motionless as the inanimate objects about it, was a pair of dull, blue eyes, fixed, dilated, hopeless. Presently they closed, and then the dim light fell upon a dead white face.

One! All over London the clocks were chiming out the hour, large clocks and small clocks, solemn chimes and light. In the office in Long Street a small clock upon the mantelpiece added its tiny voice to the general warning, and it spoke to a figure sitting at the writing-table with his head fallen forward on his arms, sleeping the heavy sleep of exhaustion, that comes when struggle and hope are alike past. Close to the furnished house in Bloomsbury a church clock with sonorous tones gave out the hour heavily, lingeringly. But that could

not have been the clock that Mrs. Custance heard, for she was no longer in the comfortless bedroom.

She was in a witness-box. She knew it, though she could see nothing—nothing but a vague indistinctness, lighted by a faint glimmer of gas. She knew it, and she knew that she was being asked a question. The question—or were there several questions?—had no definite form for her; she only knew that she had to answer, she was being forced to answer, and in the vague indistinctness around her she knew her words were being waited for and that something—something infinitely terrible, hung on them. She was being watched, too. She could see nothing, but she could feel eyes upon her; eyes looking out of the mist at her; brown eyes protesting, appealing, reproachful; steel-grey eyes. She

would not speak. She would say nothing —nothing! But those grey eyes were compelling her, dragging the words out of her in spite of herself! She had spoken.

The blue eyes were wide open again, glassy with agony, staring straight out into the room with its stiff, familiar furniture and its dim gaslight. They could not see the paper on the opposite wall, but there were sundry shadows thrown on it, queer distorted shadows thrown by commonplace objects, and there was something weird and horrible about the quiet and about the ghostly light.

Two! The clocks were striking for the second time, but the blue eyes had not closed again. They were still staring fixedly, stupidly, at the shadows on the wall. The dead white face looked strangely shrunken, there were curious grey shadows about the

mouth, and the white lips were slightly parted.

Three!

"Leila!"

Dr. Custance had waked, and was calling to her peremptorily. No change of any sort came to the horror of her face; it was as though the muscles were no longer flexible at all. The frightened start she gave was evidently an involuntary movement, and it was terribly eloquent as to the instinct of her life.

"Give me that stuff," he said harshly, "but don't give it me in that beastly little glass; there's the other in the dressing-room."

With the instinctive timid alacrity of long habit asserting itself in horrible contrast to the corpse-like rigidity of her face, Mrs. Custance rose hurriedly, went into the

dressing-room, and returned with a medicine glass of rather different shape to that into which she had poured the sleeping draught earlier in the night. She crossed the room to the wash-hand stand, and took up the bottle.

"Make haste, can't you! I don't want the stuff for breakfast."

Instinctively quickening her movements, as though the sneering, peremptory tone pierced to her consciousness through some strange numbness, his wife set down the bottle nervously, and crossed the room with frightened haste. He took the glass she gave him, looking not at it but at her with a contemptuous comment on her slowness, lifted it to his lips and drank it off. Then he lay down again rather heavily.

"Don't be all night, or you'll wake me," he said indistinctly.

Mechanically again, as though the instinct of obedience were still all-powerful with her, his wife moved away—moved as far as the foot of the bed. Then she stopped.

As though her strength had failed her all at once, she sat down suddenly in the arm-chair by which she stood; sat down in the same unconscious, unemotional attitude as that in which she had sat in the same chair three hours before, but with her frozen-looking face a little lifted, as though listening to something. Silence had fallen upon the room again, silence which was intensified by the listening attitude of the motionless figure in the chair into something terrible and unnatural. The draught had apparently taken instantaneous effect on Dr. Custance; once more the only sound that broke the stillness of the room was the sound of his breathing as he slept.

The stillness grew deeper and deeper. No movement from the sleeping figure on the bed, no movement from the listening figure in the chair. And against the dead silence the deep, even breaths of the sleeping man as they rose and fell seemed to stand out unnaturally, as though all sound were a presumption.

Deeper silence still. It was as though no sound were left on earth but the sound of those regular breathings.

The silence encroached. The breathings rose and fell with the same unerring regularity, but they were surely fainter. It encroached again, gradually, imperceptibly, and now between each of those long, faint breaths there was a tiny interval, in which sound seemed to be utterly submerged. Again, and the faint breaths were growing short, the intervals long. Again!

Silence unbroken, absolute, awful. A figure on the bed in a terrible stillness. A figure on the chair, rigid and shrunken, listening still—to nothing.

Four! Five! Daybreak. The ghastly light of dawn stole upon London once again, stole into that office room in Long Street, touched the figure of Norman Strange as he slept on, still with his head sunk on his arms. The ghastly light of dawn stole into that other room, more ghastly in its silence than the pale light itself, and touched the shrunken figure in the chair, and found it listening still.

Six! Seven! A knock came at the door, the servant's voice announced the hour, and then her steps died away in the distance. The listening figure on the chair rose mechanically and clothed itself with strange, deliberate movements and then passed out

of the room — passed the bed without a glance towards that other figure lying there in its unbroken stillness—and went downstairs.

The servant sweeping in the little hall—and doing it in some haste, having overslept herself that morning — was startled not a little by the sound of a footstep on the stairs behind her. She turned with an excuse upon her lips, wondering whether she was later than she had thought, or her mistress earlier than usual. But the excuse was never uttered. Her mistress was standing close beside her, the same neat, insignificant little figure as met the girl's eyes every morning, but with a face that hardly seemed alive at all, it was so deadly white and still. Before the girl could utter the exclamation that rose to her lips, Mrs. Custance spoke to her in a voice thin, toneless, quiet with so terrible

a quiet that it was as though the awful silence of the night had laid its spell on her for ever.

"Your master is dead," she said. "You must fetch a doctor." She turned away, went into the dining-room and shut the door.

For a moment the girl stood staring after her, the colour scared away from her ruddy cheeks, her eyes round and wide. Then with a horrible conviction—which was not without its undercurrent of thrilling excitement—that if the dreadful fact was true, her mistress's brain was certainly turned by the shock, she dropped her broom with a crash, and rushed upstairs to verify matters for herself. She opened the door of the bedroom, and then she stopped short, frightened, awed, through all the natural tendency of her class to revel in sensationalism, by the solemn

silence that seemed to hold possession of that room and thrust her out. She shut the door again, very quietly, ran downstairs and out instinctively to fetch a doctor, her face pale and awestruck, as it had never perhaps been in all her life before.

Half an hour later the clocks struck again—eight! and as they did so the hastily summoned doctor came out of that silent room and shut and locked the door. The girl was waiting for him on the landing, shaking from head to foot with the excitement that was beginning once again to dominate her awe.

"Is he—is he dead, sir?" she whispered.

The doctor was a tall, grey-haired man, with a keen, good face.

"Yes," he answered gravely. "Where is his wife?"

"She's downstairs, sir, poor missis is

Perhaps you'll come down to her at once, sir?"

"Yes," he said again in the same grave voice. He followed her downstairs to the door of the dining-room, and then, to her infinite disappointment, he dismissed her and went in alone.

Mrs. Custance was sitting in a chair against the wall; sitting apparently because she had no strength to stand; looking straight before her with a passive face over which there was creeping now a look of deadly exhaustion. She turned her head as the door opened, and fixed her blue eyes, deep and sunken as they were, upon the face of the man who entered. She did not rise. There was a moment's pause while the doctor scrutinised her keenly.

"I am speaking to Mrs. Custance, I presume?" he said at last, apparently with

a view to getting some clue from the manner of her answer as to her condition of mind.

"Yes," she answered, quietly, as she had spoken to the servant, but in a weak, low voice, eloquent, like her face, of exhaustion. The doctor's face changed slightly as she spoke. She was evidently not unhinged in mind as the servant had led him to expect.

"I am sorry to tell you that I can only confirm your fears," he continued gravely. "Your husband is dead." He paused, but she made no sign, and spoke no word, only looked at him so that he could entertain no doubt as to her having both heard and understood him. He went on in the same grave tone, watching her closely, but by no means unkindly as he spoke: "I find by your husband's bedside a glass which

has evidently contained a sleeping draught," he said. "Was he in the habit of taking such things?"

"Yes."

"He took one last night?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry to have to ask you such a question, Mrs. Custance, but I feel myself obliged to do it. Did he measure it for himself?"

"I gave it him."

"Can you tell me exactly how much you gave him?"

"I gave him a double dose."

"It was an accident, of course?"

The blue eyes rested on his face, looking out from a mysterious depth of suffering. From the pinched white face the mask of dull passivity dropped away, and all the dignity that that mask had hidden — the

dignity of patience, of pain, and of something greater yet, shone out at last as the weak voice answered simply:

"No, I killed him!"

At that same moment the hands of the little clock on the mantelpiece in the office in Long Street pointed to the quarter-past eight, and Norman's eyes fell upon them mechanically as he waked at last and lifted himself stiffly and heavily. The morning sunshine fell upon his face, and it was white and haggard still but quite composed. Sleep had come to him in the exhaustion of despair, his mind made up. It left him braced and calm. He had no hope. The blow must fall on him and crush him, and he was nerved to face it like a man.

But the hand that should have dealt the blow was still for ever.

CHAPTER XIII.

"We are early, I think."

The speaker was Aubrey Chisholm, and he was standing, with a certain nervous air of constraint upon him, in a small, comfortable-looking room with a curiously official character about it. The only other occupant of the room was Norman Strange, who stood by the window, looking out. About both men there was an air of expectancy; they were evidently waiting for something or some one. And even as Aubrey spoke the door opened, and a tall man came in, followed by a subordinate, who remained near the door, apparently waiting orders. Both the new-comers wore uniforms: the

one the uniform of an official, the other that of a warder of a prison. A few courteous words were spoken by the former, and responded to as courteously, but very gravely, by Norman, and then the latter left the room, preceded by the warder.

It was the twenty-fourth of April; on the next day Norman Strange was to sail with the colonists to Canada, and for the last fortnight he had lived like a man in a dream. He was saved. Almost by a miracle, as it seemed, the sword that had been suspended over his head had been averted, and he had escaped. In the first shock, indeed, when the news of Dr. Custance's death, and the manner in which he had come by it, had been told him by Aubrey Chisholm, pale-faced and aghast, no thought of his own position and the consequences to himself had occurred to him.

The horror was too great; the collision between incredulity and the conviction consequent on Mrs. Custance's acknowledgement of her act, too shaking. And when, at last, there forced itself upon him a realisation of all that was involved for himself, that realisation brought with it something that was almost loathing of the thought of profiting by such a hideous means. But repudiate it as he might, he was compelled to profit. The life of Dr. Custance had meant ruin to him. That life had been taken by the dead man's wife, and he himself was free.

Free, and, moreover, bound to act upon his freedom. At first he had told himself impulsively that he must at least give up all idea of sailing with the expedition; he must stay in England for a time, and do what could be done for the woman whose crime—horrible as it was to him to acknow-

ledge the fact, even to himself—had saved him. But with every hour that passed—hours in which the business of the scheme went on as usual—the difficulties, the impossibilities of such a course pressed upon him more and more. His withdrawal of himself from the expedition now would be a heavy blow to the whole affair, however adequate the reasons he might allege; and he could allege no reason for such a course calculated to satisfy either the public, the committee, or the colonists themselves. Even to himself he found it increasingly difficult to answer for such a course, and he had decided finally that he must go.

Now, on this bright April morning, his hours in England were numbered, and running quickly out, and he had come with Aubrey to the prison in which Mrs. Custance was awaiting her trial to say good-bye.

Mrs. Custance was quite alone in the world; there had been no one to come to her side, no one to take any steps towards such defence as could be made for her. And so it had come about that what little could be done—and it was hardly more than the engaging of a counsel for her—had been done for her by Norman Strange.

But as yet he had not seen her. There were phases in his mental life in these days in which he thought of her only with that vague pity with which she had always inspired him, intensified into an inexpressible compassion. Knowing what he did of Dr. Custance, the motive for her crime seemed only too terribly clear to him, and the thought of all she must have suffered at her husband's hands—no other creature knowing—stirred in him every instinct of chivalrous protection; instincts quickened a little, perhaps, by

personal consideration for the little woman he had known so long, but in kind such as any similarly helpless woman in similarly terrible circumstances would have roused in him. But there were other phases when, in his disgust at his own position as forced to profit by her deed, his fierce repudiation of that deed became almost resentment against the doer.

He followed his guide along the bare white-washed passages mechanically, like a man in a dream, conscious of nothing so strongly as of a feeling of unreality. The warder stopped at last, opened the door of a dreary-looking waiting-room, and stood aside to allow Norman to pass in; and, as he did so, at the other end of the room there rose, just as it had risen to meet him in Mrs. Custance's own drawing-room so many hundred times before, just as it had risen to meet him

the first time they met, the little figure that had been for so long at once so familiar and so insignificant to him.

For an instant Norman stopped short. The clash of the real and the unreal, of the commonplace and the tragic, in the personality of the woman before him and the circumstances under which he saw her, was overwhelming. Then he recovered himself, partially, and moved towards her, though it was still another moment before he could speak. If Mrs. Custance noticed the pause her face revealed no more than it had been wont to do. She simply waited where she stood. She was very white and fragile-looking, but the most noticeable change about her, the change which seemed to Norman to remove her altogether from the pale of his knowledge and sympathy, lay in her absolute com-

posure. It was he who was agitated and uncertain. She, in her very quiet, was mistress of the situation.

Their interview was very short. Norman throughout was struggling with a certain growing sense of repugnance born of the calmness which made her so strangely unfamiliar to him, and his words—as how could they be otherwise?—were faltering and futile. Mrs. Custance spoke very little, but there was no trouble, no distress in her face even when the final moment came, and compassion dominating at last all sense of strangeness or repugnance, he held out his hand to her in speechless sympathy. It was as though all capacity for suffering had been exhausted in her. She laid her hand quietly in his, and the blue eyes looked up into his face steadily.

"Are you married?" she said gently.

"Not yet," he said, and his voice was rather hoarse and unsteady; "this afternoon."

"If Miss Chisholm doesn't mind, give her my love, please."

The next day Norman and Stella sailed together to their new life. And in the night that followed Mrs. Custance died in prison. She died quite peacefully in her sleep, worn out, the doctor said; and her face when they found her in the morning was like the face of a little child.

She had been a little stupid woman, and her life, to all outward appearance, had been passed in one long monotone of passive insignificance. To no one human being of those with whom her uneventful life had brought her into contact had she ever seemed to possess the faintest shadow of importance. No one had thought less about

her than she had thought about herself. From herself, as from all her little world, the truth was hidden to the end; hidden by veil upon veil of humility; of patient acceptance of pain for herself as a mere matter of course, of simple dulness of perception. Hidden, too, by an absolute innocence to which so great a sin as love for a man who was not her husband was not conceivable.

Into the greyness of her life at Thornsdyke love had come unsolicited, unrecognised, born of pity and of gratitude. Day by day during those spring weeks, as Norman Strange read to her and talked to her, patronising and instructing her in his eager, youthful way, love had grown in her heart; fostered by the sense of brightness brought into her colourless life; by the sense of consideration and protection —above all things grateful to her shrinking

temperament — given her by the ready courtesy to which she was so little used; fostered above all by the sympathy and admiration with which she watched his struggle back to hope and self-respect — watched it from afar off, in humble ignorance of the part she herself played in it throughout. Norman Strange had left Thornsdyke, and in circumstances which for another woman would have meant passionate anguish and heart-broken despair, Mrs. Custance had been conscious only of a heavy, numbing pain, which never left her, and in the endurance of which the days grew longer and greyer. Five years had passed, and she had grown used to the pain which never lessened; grown so used to it that she neither analysed nor understood its sudden lightening when Norman Strange came once more into her life. Still less did she under-

stand its heavy settling down again. All the emotion and passion of a woman's life had resolved itself in her into a blind, dumb instinct of service. To work for him humbly, to strain every power, physical and mental, in that work, had become the dominant impulse of her life, and she obeyed her instinct to the end.

And in the tragedy with which that end had come, she laid down her life for the man in whom it was bound up, as surely as though she had taken it with her own hands, in the silent hours of the night that gave to Norman Strange his freedom. She had committed a crime, she had taken a human life—taken it under stress of mortal pain, deliberately, mechanically, numbed, as it were, by the resistless pressure brought to bear on her. She had been sustained by no glow of conscious self-devotion, no heroic realisation of herself as the saviour

of the man she loved, no passionate fever of emotion or excitement. For her perfect humble-mindedness such stimulus was not. The compulsion under which she acted spared her no jot of realisation of the horror of her deed, while it forced her on and gave her no way of escape. And it had killed her. She had outraged every instinct of her moral nature — pure and devout in its simplicity as that of a child; she had outraged every law of her own being in outraging the law of God, and nature took her revenge.

Norman Strange heard of her death a few days after his arrival in Canada— heard of it, and hearing, saw in it nothing but a merciful escape. A year later and it, and all the circumstances connected with it, had faded for him into a vaguely painful memory. The Essendine colony

flourished exceedingly, though Norman's dreams for it did not all come true. His life was very happy; happy in his home with Stella and her children by his side, happy in the work which he never found wanting to his hand.

And the woman to whom he owed it all remained to him for ever, as far as his own life was concerned, a mere cypher. She had saved him from despair, when despair was drawing him surely to his death. She had turned to him the heart of the woman he loved. She had saved him again a second time. And as long as he lived and worked on earth, he lived and worked in ignorance.

THE END

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